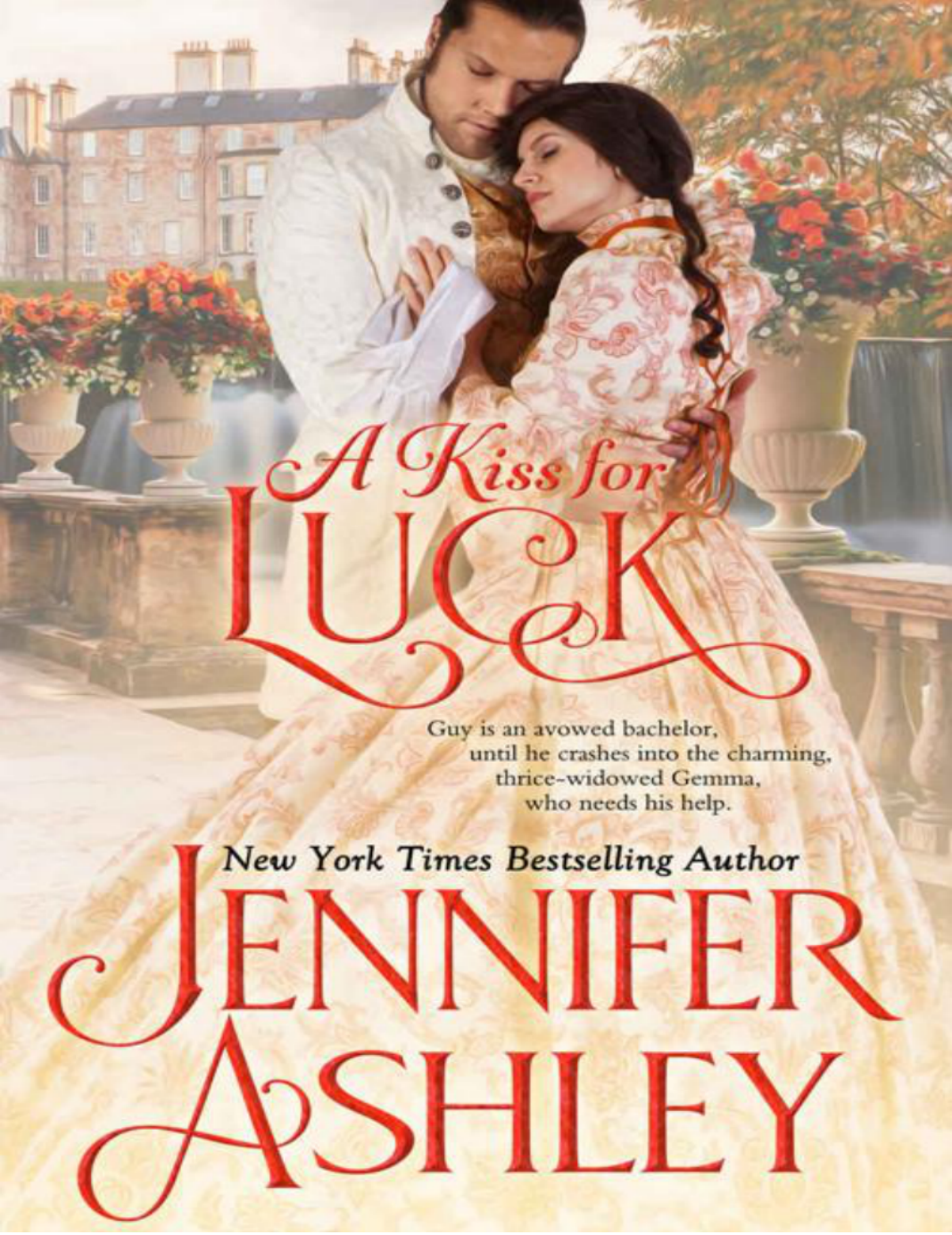

A Kiss for
LUCK
Guy is an avowed bachelor,
until he crashes into the charming,
thrice-widowed Gemma,
who needs his help.
New York Times Bestselling Author
JENNIFER
ASHLEY

A Kiss for Luck

Regency Bon Bons

Jennifer Ashley

Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Epilogue

Also by Jennifer Ashley
About the Author

Chapter 1

Ah, peace.

Lord Guy Lovell settled into an armchair in the little jewel box of a room high in Whitwell House and pulled a cheroot from his pocket. Downstairs, the ballroom thronged with guests—eager-eyed debutantes and their ambitious mamas on the prowl for potential husbands, along with wives and widows who sent sidelong glances at Guy, the bachelor second son of a marquess, with a reputation for pleasing his mistresses.

Here, a clock ticked in the silence, the pack of bloodhounds after the beleaguered fox comfortably far away.

Guy set his booted feet on a footstool, the enormous sleeves of his medieval doublet costume billowing over its arms. The gilt clock on the mantelpiece ticked tiny slices of time as Guy lifted a candle to his cheroot to light it. He leaned back, sending a gentle stream of smoke to the ceiling.

Sanctuary.

At the next tick of the clock, the door to the tiny room burst open, and a young woman darted inside in a flurry of gold and silver. She stopped short on the threshold, her deep blue eyes widening as she caught sight of Guy.

"Oh … *Thimbles!*"

Her voice was light, airy, beautiful, elegant, and extremely agitated.

Guy removed the cheroot from his mouth and came to his feet. "I beg your—"

The young woman whirled to flee, halting abruptly when a male voice floated from the direction of the stairs. "Darling? Are you up here? Where are you? *Darling?*"

Dismay crossed the young woman's face, and she quickly but silently shut the door.

Guy tamped out the cheroot in an exquisite porcelain bowl. "Madam—"

The young woman jerked around. "Shhh!" She jammed a frantic finger to her lips.

She had rich brown hair, locks of which fell to a shimmering silver-and-cream striped gown covered by a thin gold lamé cloak. Guy wasn't certain what her costume was meant to represent, and then decided the fact was irrelevant. She was graceful and charming, glittering when she moved. Her softly rounded face was flushed, red lips parted. An enchantress come to life.

The voice in the corridor grew more petulant as it neared. "My darling, where have you run to? Such a coquette. You *want* me to chase you, don't you, lovely? When I catch you …"

The young woman, who was the furthest thing from a coquette Guy had seen in many a year, looked utterly appalled.

Footsteps approached. Guy gestured abruptly to a black-lacquered screen on the other side of the room and mouthed, "Hide there."

The young woman dithered only half a second before she sped to the screen and ducked behind it. Guy waited until the pursuer had almost reached the door when he yanked it open and strode into the hall.

"Darling, there you—" The man's words cut off as he pulled his gaze from the distance and focused it with difficulty on Guy. "Oh. Lovell. That you, old chap?"

"You may call me *darling* if you wish, Wakefield," Guy drawled as he closed the door behind him. "Though I wouldn't suggest it at Brooks's. Fellows would glance at you askance. Probably at me too."

Wakefield peered at him with confused dark eyes. "Beg your pardon, my dear fellow. Thought you were someone else."

"Clearly." Guy surveyed the narrow hall with its lavish gilded molding and paintings of cavorting goddesses on the ceiling. "Who are you searching for? Who is *Darling*?"

"Oh. Er." Wakefield's face grew an unhealthy red color. "Not important."

Hector Wakefield was a young dandy who believed he set fashion as a popular man-about-Town. Tonight, he'd eschewed becoming a Shakespearean character in favor of black close-fitting trousers, à la Brummell, topped with a lemon-yellow waistcoat and green cravat. Brummell thought Wakefield an idiot.

Guy leaned one arm on the doorframe, not about to let Wakefield into the room behind him. "Your errand must have been important for you to climb all the way to the top floor. The ball is downstairs."

Wakefield vacillated and then apparently decided that attack was his best defense. "What are *you* doing up here, Lovell? Come for a tryst, have you? Are you hiding Mrs. Cooke in there?" His face softened. "Such a beauty, is she not?"

Guy forced a grin. "So that is who you are after. Are you a fool? And no, I am not conducting liaisons with lovely young widows but

seeking a bit of solitude. There's a crush below, if you hadn't noticed."

Wakefield regarded Guy in bewilderment augmented by what smelled like a vast amount of port. "Why a fool? Have you *seen* her? A goddess, is Gemma Cooke. A more delightful morsel I've never supped upon."

Guy barely hid his distaste. "I have seen Mrs. Cooke many times, and yes, she is a beautiful creature." The impact of the young woman bursting into Guy's sanctuary had been intoxicating. "She has also buried three husbands in the space of eight years. Are you aiming to be her fourth?"

Wakefield gazed at him in bafflement. "Of course not. I do not wish to *marry* the gel, only—"

"She's no courtesan, Wakefield." Guy's voice turned hard. Mrs. Cooke had been stalked by gossip, including the speculation that she'd sent her first two husbands to their graves with her ardor. "She is a widow. The same as your poor dear aunty."

Wakefield snorted. "Nothing like my dear aunty. Positively antediluvian."

"Your aunty? Or Mrs. Cooke?" Guy enjoyed Wakefield's puzzlement. "Never mind, my boy. The lady is not upstairs. You must have confused me with the woman of your dreams. Very understandable. I am told I cut quite a dash."

Wakefield, who aspired to the status of arbiter of taste, stood somewhat in awe of Guy. He ever tried to ingratiate himself with Guy and Guy's closest friend, the Duke of Ashford, with poor results thus far.

He laughed dutifully at Guy's joke. "Ah, well. She's probably in the garden seducing her next victim. How about we descend, Lovell? Find a few toothsome debutantes and be their ruin?"

Guy sent him a severe look. "Your idea of entertainment is deplorable, Wakefield. Leave the poor things alone and take yourself to the Nines. More to your taste, I think."

Wakefield brightened, but his face fell in the next instant. "Last time I was at the Nines, I lost my little all. My father nearly thrashed me. And me a grown man."

"Well, toddle off there and win it back." Guy flicked his fingers in the direction of the staircase.

Wakefield's optimism returned. "I say, what a frightfully good idea. Come with me?"

"No, no, dear boy. I'm here to enjoy a smoke. In solitude."

Guy gave Wakefield a pointed look until the man finally understood the hint. "Right. I see. Well … If you happen upon Mrs. Cooke, inform her of what an opportunity she missed."

With a vacuous grin, Wakefield wobbled around and pattered

toward the stairs. The ladies at the Nines, a notorious hell in St. James's, would know how to handle him. If Wakefield lost at cards or dice again, and his father truly thrashed him this time, Guy would consider this a good night's work.

He loitered in the hall until Wakefield's thumping footsteps faded down the stairs into the general noise from the floors below. He remained in place another few moments after that to make certain Wakefield did not return.

Only then did Guy open the door and slip back into the room.

It was empty. The screen in the corner—a black tri-part affair painted with elongated peacocks and bright chrysanthemums—did not move.

"The dreadful foe is gone," Guy said cheerfully. "The foul man has been banished." A few heartbeats of silence trickled by. "Mrs. Cooke?"

He noted another door behind the screen and realized that the young woman had likely taken herself through it to safety.

Guy's heart felt suddenly heavy. Their brief encounter would be just that—brief—Mrs. Cooke flowing into and out of Guy's life in a matter of moments. He wondered why this idea bothered him so.

Guy headed for the chair and the waiting cheroot. He'd taken two steps before a rustle made him swing back to see Mrs. Cooke peering around the edge of the screen.

She'd left off a mask for this masquerade, probably deciding it wasn't worth the bother. Guy liked that nothing impeded the view of her beautiful blue eyes. Her lady's maid or hairdresser had tried to tame her glorious dark hair into a braided coil on the top of her head, but as he'd noted before, escaped curls trickled to her shoulders and fell in wisps about her forehead. Enchanting.

Guy had first been introduced to Gemma Cooke several years ago, when she'd been Mrs. Pitts—her husbands certainly hadn't been chosen for their elegant surnames. Since then, he'd seen her only from afar as she went through husbands one after the other. Not her fault, poor thing.

"I am grateful, sir." Her voice was velvet smooth, falling pleasantly on the senses.

"At your service, madam." Guy executed a bow. A thin stream of smoke seeped from the not-quite-spent cheroot in the bowl, and he tried to nonchalantly tamp it out. It took several tries, the stubborn thing refusing to die.

Gemma's lips quirked into a smile as she watched his machinations. "I apologize for disturbing you."

"A most welcome intrusion." Guy smashed the cheroot one final time. "I find fancy dress balls dreadfully dull, but I promised a friend I'd arrive, and in suitable attire."

He spread his arms. Red satin showed through the slashes on his medieval doublet's sleeves, matching the scarlet breeches he'd worn instead of hose—he couldn't bring himself to bare his legs all the way to his hips. When he'd surveyed himself in the mirror in his dressing room, he'd decided he resembled a walking tomato.

Gemma Cooke's full smile flashed, one that made Guy almost regret his avowed bachelorhood. Almost.

"And you?" Guy asked. "I have costumed myself as one of those many extra gentlemen one sees wandering about the stage in a Shakespearean play, though one is not certain why they are there. But I do not recognize your character. Not Tatiana? I've seen a dozen or so of those downstairs." Mrs. Cooke's gown, while sumptuous, was evening finery, not fancy dress.

"Matron Chaperone." Her smile grew while a fondness entered her eyes. "I am escorting my stepdaughter this evening."

"And Wakefield chased you away from her?" Guy recalled how Wakefield had suggested ruining debutantes for amusement. He doubted Wakefield would actually attempt such a thing, because the man was a born coward, but if he found a fresh young thing milling about by herself … "You left your charge alone?" he finished with more alarm.

"No, no," Gemma said quickly. "Her great-aunt is looking after her. *She* is the true chaperone. I wanted to come, for Sonia's sake."

Sonia, if Guy remembered aright, was the daughter of Mrs. Cooke's second husband. Mrs. Cooke and her stepdaughter were fairly close in years, as the forty-year-old Sir John Broadbent had taken his second wife, Gemma, when Gemma was only twenty summers.

"I do hope young Sonia's great-aunty is redoubtable," he remarked.

The smile returned, and Guy wondered if Gemma realized it made her incredibly beautiful.

"Aunt Margot is as redoubtable as they come. No gentleman without her absolute approval will go near Sonia."

"Well, that is a relief." Guy imagined a stout matron beating off Wakefield with her cane. A delightful image.

Gemma's glance at the door told Guy she was ready to depart, the conversation finished. She'd thank him again and return to her stepdaughter, gliding out of Guy's existence forever. Something burned in his chest.

"Thimbles?" he asked quickly.

Gemma blinked. "Pardon?"

"When you burst in here and saw me, you said: *Oh, thimbles*. Or perhaps you were lisping and meant *cymbals*. Either way, a strange thing to say upon spying a chap."

A flush touched Gemma's cheeks. "Ladies are forbidden from

cursing, are they not?"

Guy had met plenty of women, particularly ones from the era of this redoubtable great-aunt Gemma mentioned, who could curse like sailors when they wished, but true, young ladies of Gemma's world were discouraged from it.

"They are indeed." Guy wanted to be agreeable.

"But sometimes, a strong word is needed. I save up ones to use when I am particularly agitated, so I will not be censured. I must be careful of my behavior because Sonia might be harmed by it."

"I see. And *thimbles* is what you say when agitated?"

"Sometimes. Or *chrysanthemums*. *Pertinacity*. *Girandole*. That's a sort of candelabra."

Guy began to grin. "How about *futchell*?"

Interest flickered on her face. "That does sound like a curse. What does it mean?"

"It's a piece of a carriage. Makes a socket to hold the pole." Guy started to hold up his fingers to demonstrate then shrugged. "I'd have to point it out."

"I shall consider it." Gemma balled one fist. "Oh, *futchells*. Yes, I think it will do."

"Excellent. Shall we think of more?"

Her smile was so natural, unforced. Different from the strained laughter and desperate witticisms Guy was used to from women who wished to seduce him.

"I truly should return to Sonia." Gemma sounded regretful—at least Guy told himself she did. "Aunt Margot is an excellent guard dog, but Sonia likes me to be near. I thank you for your kind intervention."

She turned for the door—with reluctance? Or was that Guy's hopes once again?

"Wait."

The word burst from him, and Gemma turned back, brows rising.

"I mean, I should go down first," Guy explained hastily. "Make certain Wakefield is truly gone."

Gemma's trepidation returned. "Do you mind terribly? I hate to ask you."

"Do I mind?" Guy executed a bow. "I am a gallant gentleman from the sixteenth century. I remove my cloak so my lady may walk on it across a muddy street. I travel the world to fetch a stalk of an exotic flower to present it to my one true love. What is walking downstairs to toss aside a fool of a man to clear your path?"

Gemma's eyes glowed with good humor. "Your lady is lucky indeed."

"Alas, she is nonexistent. I am a humble bachelor. My friends

invite me to their gatherings solely because I can entertain the children."

"Now, I know that is not true, Lord Guy. I am friends with Helena Ashford."

"Ah." Helena, lovely and lively-tongued, was now the Duchess of Ashford, having married Guy's friend Ash. "My true self is revealed."

"She says nothing but good about you. But do take care." Gemma's mouth quirked. "Helena is an avowed matchmaker."

"So she is." Guy thumped his hand to his chest. "Though *I* had something to do with her marriage to Ash. I will take all credit for it, in any case."

The smile grew. "She also said you were an incorrigible braggart."

Guy sighed dramatically. "So I am. Now, dear lady, you wait here while I scout. If I do not return, then all is safe. If I rush back and bid you hide under the nearest table, then it means Wakefield has not made himself scarce."

Gemma nodded, her eyes like diamonds. "I will wait."

"Excellent. Five minutes." Guy pointed to the gold clock, which was still quietly ticking away. Strange, it sounded more lively now. "That is all I should need."

"Of course."

There was no reason Guy should remain in this room any longer. He must put his words to action and clear the way as he'd promised.

The fact that he'd much rather stay in the little chamber and converse with Mrs. Cooke for the rest of the night should not matter. She wished to return to her stepdaughter, and Guy would make certain she could.

Then why did his feet drag? Why did he make excuses to himself to turn and make another ridiculous bow?

Before he left the room, Guy let himself absorb the vision of Gemma Cooke once more. Her gold and silver ensemble shimmered in the candlelight, giving her dark hair a rich sheen. Her blue eyes held a depth he wanted to gaze into from much closer than across the room.

Guy had the sudden longing to rush to her, rest his hand on her arm, tilt her chin up, and after studying her face for a time, lean and kiss her …

What the devil was the matter with him? Guy jerked himself from the incline he'd began toward her, his heart thudding unpleasantly. Hiding his unease, he gave her a smart salute and turned to the door.

It was so very hard to open the thing, but he finally made himself do it and step out into the hall. One final glance at Gemma, poised near the screen, red lips parted, almost had him dashing back inside, a fool to the end.

Guy tightened his grip on the handle, nodded to Gemma again,

and forced himself to close the door.

He stood outside the room for a long time, his breathing unsteady, before a chiming clock on the landing reminded him of his errand. If Gemma rushed out after her allotted five minutes and found him still there …

She'd crash into him in the fragrant softness of woman, and Guy would be lost.

He dragged in a breath, turned, and marched for the stairs.

"Oh, *chrysanthemums,"* he muttered with feeling.

Chapter 2

The luxuriousness of the room faded with Lord Guy's departure. The clock did not gleam as much, the vibrant colors of the gilded and painted ceiling dimmed, and the crystal chandelier lost its luster.

Gemma let out a breath as his footsteps faded into the distance, finding herself trembling. She'd been holding herself tightly since she'd entered this grand house, Sonia in tow, Aunt Margot leading the way like an advance guard. Tristan, her first husband's son, four years older than Gemma, had escorted them to stave off scandal.

Scandal. *Ha.* Too much of it in Gemma's life. Even now, the ladies downstairs whispered about her behind fans. Had Mrs. Cooke hastened her husbands to their various demises? How dare she parade about, attracting gazes from all the gentlemen? No wonder her stepson Tristan bore such a stern scowl.

Gemma could have told them that a scowl was Tristan's usual expression. Annoyed or elated, Tristan wore the same forbidding frown. He, like his father, simply had a dour face, behind which lay an affable if unambitious man.

Lord Guy, whom she'd briefly met years ago when she'd been a nervous new bride at eighteen, hadn't gazed at her tonight in shock, outrage, speculation, or outright craving. He'd grinned at her like a friend and talked to her.

Not at her, not around her, not through her. *To* her.

It was an interesting sensation.

Also interesting was how the tension had receded from her at the sight of his smile, the warmth in his eyes. Even the rumble of his voice when he'd driven off Mr. Wakefield in the hall had comforted her. If Lord Guy did speculate on Gemma's string of marriages, he'd hidden it well.

The clock gave a hiccupping wheeze and gently chimed the half hour. Gemma started. She must pay attention to the time. Five minutes, he'd said.

Five minutes to brood, pace the carpet, and wonder why the sparkle had rushed back into her life when Guy Lovell had risen from

the chair at her entrance, why it had ebbed when he'd gone.

His costume—silver and black doublet with gashed red sleeves and red-orange breeches—had hugged a trim and muscular body. Lord Guy had no cause to be ashamed of what the tight costume outlined.

Gemma hadn't admired a man's form in a long time. Her last husband, Rupert Cooke, had been handsome, but not with the vigorous handsomeness of Guy. Rupert had been thin, with golden hair and an effervescence of a being not long for this earth. Which had proved true, when he'd let himself be shot in a duel. The lady he'd dueled over had not been Gemma.

She'd decided, after Rupert's death, that she was finished with marriage, finished with gentlemen entirely. Gemma could help Sonia find a suitable husband to ensure her happiness and be content with that. John Broadbent, Sonia's father, had been a good person. If he'd lived, Gemma might have found tranquility.

Now Guy Lovell had stolen the very air in the chamber and taken it with him when he'd gone.

The clock ticked relentlessly, marking off each minute until her allotted five was over. Gemma must now return to the ballroom and the crush, paste on a smile, and face the speculators.

But Guy would be downstairs to fend off gentlemen like Mr. Wakefield, acting the gallant swain his costume presented him to be. Even if Guy never spoke to her again, never looked at her, she'd use his upright, scarlet and silver form as an anchor, and finish the night with calm.

Gemma swallowed on her dry throat, squared her shoulders, and strode quickly from the room.

The upper reaches of the house were quiet. As Gemma descended the staircase, the noise from the lower floors flowed up to her, growing louder and louder, until it became a din she pressed against. Somewhere in the ballroom, musicians played, but the dancers must struggle to hear them.

Aunt Margot and Sonia would be wondering where on earth she'd gone to. Tristan, she did not worry so much about. He'd fled to a card room as soon as they'd entered, where he'd remain sequestered with fellow male sufferers until time to escort the ladies home.

The first person Gemma saw upon entering the overheated ballroom was Lord Guy.

Though plenty of revelers wore costumes equally as colorful as or even more fanciful than Guy's, they faded into drab blurs, while Guy stood out like a beacon. He spoke with animation to the Duke of Ashford, a quiet, stern man the same age as Guy, but with a more forbidding demeanor.

His wife, the vivacious Helena, had gathered a crowd of matrons

around her, her colorful headdress bobbing as she spoke animatedly. At least Helena's chatter distracted the ladies from Gemma's re-entrance.

As Gemma pried her gaze from Lord Guy and turned to make for Aunt Margot's tall turban, she ran forcibly into a gentleman's rather portly stomach.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she exclaimed as she bounced from him. She'd been so focused on Guy she'd never seen the man. Silly, silly …

"My goodness." The gentleman, chortling, brought up a quizzing glass to peer at her. "I do believe it is the very charming Mrs. Cooke, rushing about like a debutante. Dear, dear."

Gemma realized in dismay that she'd dashed headlong into Sir Ronald Pugh, one of the greatest gossips in the *ton*. Sir Ronald attended every ball, every soiree, musicale, supper, club, and racing meet in order to gather grist for his mill. He knew every bit of scandal on every person in London, and on many of those who'd fled to the Continent to escape such scandal, or their creditors, or both.

"Sir Ronald." Gemma gave him a polite curtsy. It never did to offend Ronald Pugh, which was why he was invited everywhere. No one liked him, but everyone feared his very busy tongue.

"Now where did you pop from?" Sir Ronald's glance turned sly. "I noticed the absence of Mr. Wakefield from the ballroom just now as well."

Gemma pressed her fingers into her gloved palm and tried to imagine an iced-over river, cold rain, a biting wind—anything to keep from blushing. If Sir Ronald decided that Gemma had nipped out for a tête-à-tête with Hector Wakefield, it would be all over London by breakfast and penetrate the rest of the world by tomorrow teatime.

She opened her mouth to make some quip about Mr. Wakefield being free to wander about as he pleased, when a deeper voice brought forth the flush she'd striven to hide.

"Sir Ronald, have you nothing better to do than toss ladies aside as you plough through the ballroom? Though I admit it is a bit dense in here. One needs a scouting party and full armor."

Guy Lovell had appeared beside Gemma as if by magic. Behind him was the Duke of Ashford, his mouth a firm line to Guy's sardonic grin.

Sir Ronald caught Gemma's heated blush, swiveled his gaze to Guy, and made his decision.

"Ah, the chivalrous Sir Guy. Come to rescue your lady? Oh, Your Grace." He fawned. "I did not see you there. How are you, sir?"

"Very well." Ashford gave him a cool nod. "I believe your sister is seeking you, Sir Ronald."

Sir Ronald let out an aggrieved sigh. "She ever hunts for me,

believing me up to no good. Has since we were five years old, though I wager you cannot imagine me as a chubby lad. Ta-ta, my friends."

He fluttered a hand and began his bustle across the room—in the opposite direction from where his sister stood, Gemma noted. As he went, Sir Ronald grasped another gentleman by the lapel, pulling him aside to whisper his latest delicious gossip.

Did you see? Gemma wagered he was saying. *Gemma Cooke and Sir Guy Lovell. Well, I never.*

Guy held out his colorful arm to Gemma. "May I escort you, my dear? To avoid more collisions with well-padded obstacles?"

Gemma's flush would not retreat. "I am trying to reach my aunt. Well, she is not strictly *my* aunt, but …"

"Excellent. Let us seek her." Guy turned to his friend. "Thank you, Ash. Your glowering countenance was just the antidote needed for the poison that is Sir Ronald Pugh."

Ashford frowned at Guy's humor and bowed courteously to Gemma. "Mrs. Cooke. My wife sends you her best wishes."

"Thank you." Gemma slipped her hand through the crook of Guy's elbow. Warmth cascaded through her at the sensation of firm flesh beneath the silk. "Please greet Helena fondly for me and tell her I will pay a call on her soon."

"I will do so."

Ashford bowed a second time, and Gemma bent her knees in a hurried curtsy. She liked how steadily Guy's arm held her as she did so.

The duke left them, the crowd parting for him and his long stride.

"The epitome of good manners, is Ash," Guy said. "He ever tries to make me emulate him, but unfortunately I cannot maintain a straight countenance when I do so. I'm a frivolous being, I am afraid. You can discern this by the clothes I wear."

Gemma felt giggles welling up inside her, giggles that hadn't formed since she'd been Sonia's age. She strove to suppress them, and they came out as a cough.

"Are you well, Mrs. Cooke? Perhaps a turn on the terrace? It is roasting hot in here."

"Best not." Gemma glanced at the ladies and gentlemen who stared as she and Lord Guy strolled past. "Sir Ronald already is beginning to circulate his stories, whether true or false."

"That you and I were upstairs alone in a chamber? That story *is* true, as you know. The fact that we stood across the room from each other and spoke in halting politenesses will not be gleaned, I wager." Guy heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Nothing for it. We must dance together."

"We must? Why?"

“Because, first, it will be an excellent way to throw off any of your other unwelcome suitors. Second, if we dance, this will demonstrate that we are friends, fond of each other. Better an open interest than a clandestine meeting. If we are not embarrassed or secretive, then the speculators might conclude we’d done nothing untoward.”

“I am not certain I follow your logic, but I agree.” Gemma kept her gaze straight ahead and pretended not to notice the stares, the fans. Flitter-flutter. Whisper, whisper.

“Agree that we are not embarrassed?”

“To the dance,” Gemma said hastily. “I am very much embarrassed, yes.”

“Nonsense. We have done nothing shocking at all, and Sir Ronald has no evidence. If it will cool your cheeks, imagine our dear Sir Ronald as he bade us to, as a chubby lad of five years, fleeing his formidable older sister.”

The image flashed through Gemma’s head of a boy standing in the long grass of a meadow, peering fearfully through the stalks as a girl called his name. The trouble was, the little boy had the face of Sir Ronald as he was now, complete with beard.

She burst out laughing and quickly lifted her fan to cover her mouth. Guy winked at her.

He led her to one of the lines forming in the middle of the floor for the next country dance. The ballroom was enormous, with room for three separate columns of dancers.

Guy and Gemma joined the middle row, facing each other across a few feet of polished floor.

The orchestra began, and the ladies and gentlemen curtsied and bowed. Gemma caught the quick rhythm, and her slippers tapped. She loved to dance.

A few beats later, Guy’s hand came out, and Gemma went forward to meet it. He spun her around him, and handed her back to her place, then she went to the gentleman at her right corner while Guy approached that gentleman’s partner.

She and her gentleman switched positions and soon she was paired with Guy again as they promenaded down the line and around to a new place.

Gemma found herself smiling, her heart beating faster with the pace and excitement. Guy was an excellent dancer, moving with grace, splendid to watch. His costume showed off his legs, muscles playing as he glided with the music. He never missed a step, was as courteous to his secondary partner as he was to Gemma, and full of tasteful quips for the gentleman.

In short, he was well-mannered and gallant, the very epitome of what a gentleman should be.

Gemma admitted to herself it wasn't Guy's politeness that caught her interest. It was the way he swayed in the dance, his solid hand on hers, arm guiding her when needed so she never lost her footing. She found herself wondering what it would be like to try more scandalous dances with him, something she could never do at a prominent society ball.

Dancing made Gemma forget the stares, the raised lorgnettes, the whispers behind fans. She saw these things out of the corner of her eye as she whirled back and forth, sashaying up and down the line, but they seemed distant and unimportant. She joyously smiled at her partners, her feet moving in perfect time with the music.

All too soon, the dance came to an end. Guy held out his arm to lead her away, Gemma laughing and breathless.

"Oh no." Guy's step faltered halfway to the chairs at the edge of the ballroom.

"I say, there you are Mrs. Cooke." Mr. Wakefield, who had clearly not left the ball for the hells of St. James's, sauntered to them. "Thank you for finding her for me, Lovell, old thing." He held out a hand to Gemma. "Fancy a caper, madam?"

"Mrs. Cooke has wrenched her foot and must sit down," Guy said before Gemma could open her mouth.

Thank heavens for Guy, because no excuse had sprung to Gemma's mind, and she could not refuse without being considered rude—one more thing for the guests to talk about.

Wakefield did not move. "Oh, bad show. I am happy to escort you to a seat and bestow lemonade and ices on you, dear Mrs. Cooke."

"I have already offered such services and been accepted," Guy said in a voice that held warning. "Better luck elsewhere, my friend."

Wakefield peered at Guy with bloodshot eyes. "Good Lord, Lovell. Are you saying you're potty about Mrs. Cooke?" He sniggered. "How riveting."

"Go soak yourself, Wakefield. In something other than port, in which you obviously have immersed yourself already."

"Do watch your tone, Lovell." Wakefield's amusement died into sourness. "You'll find yourself on the wrong end of a dueling pistol."

"I've seen you shoot," Guy said mildly. "I have little to worry about. Come along, Mrs. Cooke. A turn in the cool air of the terrace will be just the thing. We'll settle you, and I'll fetch lemonade and your aunt."

Wakefield glanced across the ballroom in alarm. Most people knew Margot Spencer, nee Margot Broadbent, and few wished to cross swords with her. Mr. Wakefield made a hasty bow.

"Pleased to have spoken with you, Mrs. Cooke. I must dash. I'll give you the cut direct later, Lovell."

“I look forward to it.” Guy made him the exaggerated bow of a sixteenth-century courtier as Wakefield tottered away. When Guy rose, he tightened his grip on Gemma’s arm. “Come along. Before another mad swain tries to cut in.”

Gemma quickened her steps to match his as they made for the terrace door. They hadn’t moved more than five yards before a matron, her face rouged to cherry red, stepped in front of them.

“Young Lord Guy,” she sang. Her lorgnette waved as she curtsied, her skirts swaying like a galleon in a wind. “My daughter, Amelia, is in danger of being a wallflower tonight. Do take pity on her, won’t you?”

“I must settle Mrs. Cooke first, Lady Wilding. The poor thing has turned her ankle.”

“Dear, dear.” The lady tutted. “Mrs. Cooke, your aunt is parading your stepdaughter about something dreadful. Young Sonia must be careful not to mar her reputation.” She stared at Guy blatantly, then Gemma, and frowned formidably. “My heavens, do I guess that there is a *match* in the making?”

“Between me and Mrs. Cooke?” Guy sent her an incredulous look. “Good lady, can a gentleman not escort a young woman to a chair without rushing her to the altar the next day?”

“I did not mean you and Mrs. Cooke, silly boy. I meant you and Miss Sonia Broadbent.”

Gemma stifled a gasp. “Not at all, Lady Wilding. I promise you, Lord Guy is simply being polite to me. After all, I finagled a dance from him.”

“Did you?” The words were a pronouncement. Up came the lorgnette. “It is sweet of you to remove my scrutiny from him, Mrs. Cooke. I shall simply have to ask Margot.”

Lady Wilding lowered her lorgnette and sailed past. Guy hastened Gemma toward the terrace doors—Gemma made certain to limp.

“Good Lord.” Guy collapsed upon a stone bench in the darkness of the terrace, pulling Gemma down beside him. “She’s as bad as Sir Ronald. Possibly worse, and they’re cronies.”

“Indeed, between the two of them they could write an entire opera about us, complete with dastardly villains and tragically lovelorn heroes.” Gemma stifled the urge to laugh.

Guy spread his hands, broad in his gloves. “What is to be done? Oh, the trials of being young, beautiful, and unwed. You are the beautiful one, of course.”

“I have been wed too many times,” Gemma said lightly. “When I was twice widowed, I was the object of pity. Three times, and it begins to be my fault.”

“Only the cruel believe that.” Guy’s hand found hers, offering

warm strength. “I will take to task any who dare say so.”

“They do not say it outright. I could defend myself if they did. It is the whispers and rumors, sidelong looks, the conversations broken off as I enter a room, that I cannot fight.”

“I do understand.” Guy sat in silence for a moment. “I am sorry they speak of you so, Mrs. Cooke. I will strive to quell such talk whenever I encounter it.”

When Guy left off the exaggerated wit, his voice was low and velvet-deep, full of rich undertones that made Gemma’s heart beat faster. A glimpse, she thought, of his true self.

“You are very kind,” she managed.

“Not really. Weary, I think. I’ve weathered the machinations of the *ton* for too long.” He bit out a laugh. “Listen to me, going on like a doddering old fool. I am to be entertaining you, not fatiguing you senseless.”

Gemma thought she could listen to him all night without growing tired of it.

“Not at all.” She unfurled her fan and waved it in front of her face. “I too have weathered their machinations.”

For a moment, they sat quietly, the music and voices in the ballroom muting what noises rose from the street in this part of London.

After a time, Guy stirred. “Lady Wilding no doubt has her eye on the clock and on this window, waiting for me to emerge and dance with her daughter. Do you know her? I’ve met the girl but formed no opinion of her character.”

“A miniature of her mother,” Gemma said.

Guy shuddered. “My night is ruined.”

Gemma couldn’t suppress a smile. “Do have great care for what you say to her. One wrong word and Amelia and Lady Wilding will take it as a proposal, causing you great scandal when you try to extract yourself. This has already happened to another young gentleman, who had to flee to the Continent.”

Guy’s expression of alarm was comical. “Heaven help me.”

“Simply stay silent during the dance. Do not agree or disagree with anything Amelia says, even if it’s as innocuous as the weather. Simply smile and occasionally nod, but not too often.”

“Damnation—er, ah, I mean, *futchells*.”

Gemma regarded him in amusement. “My second husband swore quite a lot. And he had the kindest heart. If such words were to shock me senseless, I’d have lain in a permanent swoon long ago.” She trailed off wistfully. “John was a good man.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Guy studied her, his amusement gone. “A happy marriage is a rare thing.”

“It is.” Gemma had told herself she would not wallow in her sorrows or the past—that was no way to continue with life. She had been lucky to experience a brief time of happiness. Most women were not so fortunate.

“And why I have not pursued matrimony,” Guy said. “I have a brother who is carrying on the family name with three sons, leaving me to be the charming bachelor. I have unfortunately seen the misery that men—and women—fall into because they are pushed into marriage by well-meaning families.” Guy flushed. “Oh, there goes my boot into my mouth again.” He stuck out his booted foot and regarded it mournfully. “You are here to seek a husband for your stepdaughter.”

“No need to apologize. I agree with you. Aunt Margot believes it a good idea that Sonia marries soon, but I have taken it upon myself to be guardian of Sonia’s happiness. If she does not like a gentleman then she will not be pushed to wed him.”

“Very kind of you.” Guy applauded, his gloved hands muffled. “An excellent notion. A chaperone of happiness.”

Why did she enjoy it so when Guy praised her? “I hope to give her aid,” Gemma babbled, flustered. “I am rather long in the tooth for anything else.”

Guy sent her an incredulous stare. “Long in the tooth? Mrs. Cooke, you are youth itself. The debutantes tonight gaze at you in envy.”

Gemma fanned herself rapidly, trying not to be flattered. “You are kind, but you should not say such foolish things.”

Guy’s intense stare was devoid of mockery. “My dear Mrs. Cooke, this is the least foolish utterance I have made all night. Why do you think Wakefield pursues you so?”

“For my fortune, of course.” Gemma had no illusions as to Mr. Wakefield’s true interest.

“No, indeed, it is not your fortune that draws his eyes.”

Guy’s admiring scrutiny made Gemma’s cheeks heat. She should not care whether Guy Lovell thought her attractive, but his implied compliment pleased her far too much.

A church clock struck somewhere in the darkness, tolling away their precious time. Gemma longed to remain here on the terrace all night, safe in this quiet place, with Guy gazing at her in silent regard.

She let out a small sigh. “You ought to return for your pledged dance.”

Guy glanced quickly away from her, over the terrace to the park beyond. Was he disappointed she was sending him away? Or simply girding himself for the dreaded dance?

When he turned back, his eyes held bleakness, his frivolous smile gone. “Wish me luck?” He stuck out his hand.

Gemma gladly took it, and they shared a mannish, friendly

handshake.

She did not know where the next impulse came from. One moment, she was sensible Gemma, saying farewell to an acquaintance. In the next, a wicked, impetuous woman rose from her depths.

She kept hold of Guy's hand, tugged him closer, and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

The muscle in his jaw jumped under her lips, his skin smooth, warm, bristles of his emerging whiskers pleasantly scratching. He smelled of soap and the perspiration from their dance, a male musk Gemma hadn't scented in a long while. A fire built in her heart, a spark, long suppressed, awakening.

"For luck," she whispered as she drew away.

Guy studied her. A darkness flickered in his eyes, one that wiped away the quips and flirtation. The carefree bachelor who never spoke a serious sentence was a façade, she saw. A deeper man lurked behind it, one he covered with his curtain of frivolity.

A cool breeze stirred Gemma's hair. Before she could suggest they retreat indoors, Guy's heavy hand touched her shoulder.

With a strength she did not want to resist, Guy tugged her to him and kissed her parted lips.

Chapter 3

Some part of Guy cursed him for his impulse, but that voice was drowned by the flood of satisfaction inside him.

Gemma's lips were soft, silken, parting for him, and at the same time hesitant. She tasted of warmth, excitement, all the things Guy loved.

He touched her cheek, thumb caressing, the only point of contact between them. That is, until Gemma rested a hand on his waist, firm through the layers of his costume.

Imagining that hand on his bare flesh made Guy harden, until he worried about exactly how much of the doublet covered him below the waist.

Gemma's lips moved beneath his, and flame stirred in his blood. She smelled of roses, fresh and sweet. Her breath on his cheek, a sigh where she'd pressed a kiss, heated him through.

When she drew back, Guy made a noise in his throat, reluctant to let her go. He forced himself to place his hand on hers and lift it from his side.

"Forgive me," she whispered.

Forgive *her*? Guy had fallen upon her mouth like a lovesick fool and kissed her as though they'd been lovers for years, and she wanted *him* to forgive *her*.

He cleared his throat. "My dear, you delight me." He wanted nothing more than to kiss her again, but he became aware of the light and noise outside their haven of darkness, dancers floating only yards away inside the ballroom. "But we should return before someone stumbles out here and forms the wrong impression."

Gemma's eyes glittered in the dim light. "They already have the wrong impression of me."

The words were bitter, making Guy long to hold her again, to soothe her and tell her he would protect her now.

Which would be the entirely wrong thing to say. Gemma didn't need a protector, not in the lover sense of the word, but a friend.

He stood up, which took all his strength, and held out his arm. "Shall we dance back inside, pretending we stood here a moment for a

breath of air?"

"I think we had better." Gemma rose with every show of reluctance. "Though I am supposed to have hurt my foot."

Guy tucked her arm through his. "We will pretend it is better—a temporary injury. Never fear for your reputation, my dear. Everyone knows me for a frivolous chap, excruciatingly polite to the ladies and keeping my vices away from virtuous society balls. Though I happen to know that several of the matrons present are enjoying themselves with gentlemen who are attending this ball with their wives and daughters. Are any of the *haut ton* virtuous, I wonder?"

Gemma tilted her head to study him as he babbled his nonsense. "Do *you* have so many vices, Lord Guy?"

Something dark stirred inside him, as though the years he'd frittered away trying to forget friends lost on the battlefield and his family's conviction that he was a useless second son converged into a pool of regret.

"Hundreds," he said lightly. "Now, let us laugh and be uncaring, like the dear friends we are."

Guy took her hand and sashayed her inside, holding her steadily as though worried about her wrenched foot. They swung to the end of a line of another country dance just beginning, joining in without missing a step.

The young lady in the couple they landed next to raised her brows, but the rest of the set accepted that they had simply rushed to the figure late.

Guy's body hummed as though lighting flickered through it. The kiss with Gemma had seared fire through his body, lit excitement in his heart.

He danced with exuberance, trying to burn off the heat, but it stayed with him through that round, and the rest of the ball, and followed him all the way home to his empty bed in his lavish but lonely flat.

GUY ARRIVED the next afternoon at the house in Grosvenor Square that Gemma Cooke called home. Left to her by her second husband, John Broadbent, for use for her lifetime—which her third husband had not been able to touch—it was a tall and elegant house with a fan-lighted door and neat rows of windows. Gemma lived here with her stepdaughter, Sonia, and Aunt Margot Spencer, Broadbent's aunt. Very cozy.

Guy had found out these details from his sister-in-law, Alice, the Marchioness of Keeling, who knew everything about the lives of

everyone in Mayfair.

Guy had no business calling upon Mrs. Cooke. After settling Gemma with Aunt Margot last night, he'd taken his obligatory dance with Lady Wilding's daughter, Amelia, following Gemma's advice to paste on a stiff smile and occasionally nod when it seemed safe to do so. Amelia had returned to her mother with the impression that Guy was a vapid and disappointing gentleman. Thank heavens.

Gemma and her family had departed just before Guy had finished the dance with Amelia, depriving him of the chance to take Gemma onto the floor once more and tell her that her advice had been sound.

No business calling on her except one friend inquiring about the well-being of another.

Naturally, he should inquire whether Mrs. Cooke's feigned turned ankle was completely healed, should he not? The *ton* would praise him for his kindness.

Thus vindicating his stroll from Piccadilly to Grosvenor Square, Guy arrived at the correct time for calls and found that he'd been superseded by a few young ladies and half a dozen young men who'd come to pay their respects to Sonia. The requisite posies filled the hall, bouquets that were not so large as to be tasteless nor too small to show the proper esteem.

Guy's entrance to the drawing room earned him a glare by several of the young pups who'd assumed he'd come to kneel at Sonia's feet. Gemma was nowhere in sight.

"Mrs. Spencer." Guy bowed to Aunt Margot upon being announced by a long-suffering footman. "How delightful to see you. I trust you are well. Miss Broadbent, I trust you too are well."

"Of course, Lord Guy." Sonia, who'd risen with all the ladies at his entrance, gave him a perfect curtsy. The other young ladies and Aunt Margot followed suit, while the gentlemen, having to stand because the ladies did, poorly hid their annoyance at Guy's unanticipated entrance.

Aunt Margot stalked toward Guy with dignity, her interesting headgear wobbling with her gait. A band of wildly colored fabric had been wound around and around itself on her head, culminating in a tassel that draped down her neck.

Aunt Margot noticed his attention to it and sniffed, which made the tassel bob. "It is a turban, dear boy. That is what I claim. So pleased you have come, Lord Guy."

In spite of her good-humored response, she looked a bit harried. The young men in the drawing room glowered at each other while Sonia and her friends, now restored to their seats, tried in vain to engage the gentlemen in conversation. None of the young men seemed inclined to speak, more interested in waiting each other out than

actually speaking to Sonia.

"Was passing by," Guy said to Aunt Margot, trying to sound offhand. "As I danced with Mrs. Cooke last evening, I thought I'd call and make certain I didn't tread on her toes too much."

Aunt Margot's brows rose. "She seems to be walking without hindrance. Do sit, Lord Guy. Or … I have it. Regale us with a melody on the pianoforte. The Marchioness of Keeling says your playing has a light and pleasing touch."

Silently cursing his sister-in-law, Guy politely agreed and made his way to the pianoforte as Aunt Margot returned to her chair.

He sat on the pianoforte's stool and rested his hands on the ivory keys, reflecting that he only ever completely relaxed when sitting at the instrument. Now, what to give them? Something by Haydn? Too complex perhaps. There were the simple songs of the day that the young ladies might like, but Guy hadn't come here to woo debutantes.

He hit upon a tune simply called a "Bagatelle" by its composer, pretty and sweet, but with a depth not found in many pieces.

Guy closed his eyes, the better to call the notes to mind, and began the six-eight rhythm. He swayed with the music, which let him shut out the room and think only of the soft pressure of Gemma's lips upon his.

GEMMA HEARD the notes of the pianoforte float upstairs to her sitting room, where she'd sought a brief refuge from the understated drama in the drawing room. Usually, she was happy to sit with Sonia and her callers, taking it upon herself to revive the conversation when it flagged, and make certain that every young man—and woman—was able to contribute to the discussion.

Today, she'd been restless and easily distracted. She'd retreated when several gentlemen arrived who were not interested in Sonia but hinted at a desire to corner Gemma. She'd excused herself, citing a headache. Sure enough, the two gentlemen had departed in impatience.

Sitting alone had not helped her agitation. She'd lain awake most of the night reliving Guy's kiss, the warmth of his touch, and strangely, the scent of him. Clean and male, something she'd never experienced. Her first husband's odor had not been pleasant, and both Broadbent and especially Mr. Cooke, had loved to drench themselves in scent.

Guy's skin had been pleasant to press her nose to. His lips even more pleasant to caress with her own.

His kiss had awakened something in her she hadn't been aware

had lain dormant. Since her third husband's death, she'd retreated to a place of numbness, her first shock and grief giving way to a dull haze.

She'd gone through her days like an automaton, devoting herself to Sonia, being polite to those outside the family, but nothing beyond that. She had no children of her own to love and indulge—Gemma had concluded she was barren, as three marriages had produced no offspring—so she'd presided over Sonia's debut, happy to help her dear stepdaughter and friend.

When she'd rushed into the small chamber in Lady Whitwell's mansion, and beheld the dark eyes and wide smile of the handsome gentleman within, her heart had unfolded like a flower touched by morning sunshine.

She could still feel Guy's hand on hers as they danced, the power of his body that came through the arm that guided her, the heat of his kiss, and the sudden, intense desire that had coursed through her veins.

Gemma's night had been restless indeed.

She liked the melody that reached her. It could not be Sonia playing, because while she performed prettily, she worked through the pieces as though they were a tutor's exercise and soon had enough. None of Sonia's callers today were gifted—several of them had already banged out tunes to the polite applause of the rest.

This player was different. The notes flowed one to the other in a pleasing glide, the touch light and effervescent. When bass notes chased the treble, she could feel the franticness of the pursuit. Back to light sweetness, and then the dark emotion of the bass.

She'd planned to keep to her room until calls were over, but now the music drew her forth.

Gemma patted her hair in place, straightened the sash of her dark blue afternoon gown, and departed the room.

As she descended the stairs, the piece went into rousing chords, but by the time she reached the drawing room, the player had moved to dulcet notes two octaves above middle C, the instrument tinkling like a music box.

Gemma halted in the doorway. Guy Lovell sat at the pianoforte, his eyes closed as he lifted his fingers tenderly from the keys.

He wore a black suit with close-fitting trousers and coat, his dark hair catching the sunlight from the windows. He relaxed as the last echoes of the piece faded, hands resting lightly on his thighs, not caring in the least that no one in the room paid any attention to him. The ladies chattered away, the gentlemen occasionally inserted quips meant to impress them, and Aunt Margot listened to make certain the conversation remained decorous.

Unthinkable that no one had fallen to the carpet in a blissful

swoon to Guy's playing.

Gemma crossed to the pianoforte, lightly applauding. "Excellent, Lord Guy. Thank you for giving us that beautiful music."

Sonia glanced up, flushing as she realized he'd finished with no acknowledgment. Usually Sonia was scrupulously polite, but she was understandably distracted by the array of ladies and gentlemen in the room.

"Yes, thank you, Lord Guy," Sonia said. "That was most pleasant."

"Exquisite," Gemma added. It had been that.

Guy leapt lightly to his feet, bowing. "Your praise lights my day, Mrs. Cooke."

Gemma smiled at him as she crossed to a chair near Aunt Margot—the young people had taken over her former seat.

"Pray, give us another," Gemma said.

Before Guy could answer, the footman dashed in.

"Lord Steven Humphries and the Honorable Mr. Edward Slater, madam."

Gemma hid a flinch as two gentlemen about ten years older than Sonia's suitors scampered past the footman and bowed, both grinning broadly at Gemma. Lord Steven Humphries and the Hon. Mr. Edward Slater pursued her as Mr. Wakefield had the previous night. Lord Steven hunted the fortune he supposed he could acquire from Gemma upon marrying her, and Mr. Slater made it clear it was not marriage he was after.

While the new gentlemen inserted themselves among the crowd, Guy remained at the pianoforte, leafing through music as though uninterested in their arrival.

As Lord Steven and Mr. Slater both tried to herd Gemma toward a seat that would be close to theirs, Guy looked up.

"I'm happy to play another, Mrs. Cooke, but I will need you to turn the pages for me. Do you mind doing so?"

"She's too busy to play lackey to you, Lovell, old chap," Mr. Slater announced.

Gemma cut over his reply. "Of course. I would be happy to."

She hurried to the pianoforte and settled on the chair Guy had placed next to his stool.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Not at all." Guy kept his voice low. "A man could do no less for his friend."

Friend. Gemma liked the word.

Guy began the next piece, a sonata for keyboard by Johann Christian Bach, the more famous Bach's youngest son who'd become music master for Queen Charlotte. Gemma loved his music, so clear and lucid, though she'd never been very good at the pianoforte.

Guy's fingers flew through the piece, the music sweet and flowing. Gemma followed along, quickly turning each page as Guy reached the end of it.

Music bathed her senses, the pianoforte vibrating under her hand as she rested it lightly on the music stand. The notes drowned out the conversation beyond the instrument, encasing her and Guy in a private space of sound.

He nodded at her to turn another page, and his arm brushed hers as he reached to the top keys for the notes. The tingle the movement caused was decidedly *not* musical. Gemma heated all the way through, and he sent her a wink, continuing his playing without missing a note.

The piece ended far too soon. The ladies and Aunt Margot applauded, and the gentlemen joined in grudgingly.

One gentleman, Mr. Townsend, whom Gemma considered a bit stiff, did nod in true appreciation for Guy's skill. Mr. Townsend was twenty-five, excruciatingly polite, and was considered rather bookish against the dashing and scrape-prone bloods who fluttered about Sonia.

Mr. Townsend was the least objectionable suitor so far, Aunt Margot and Gemma agreed, but dull, Sonia had declared. Tediously so.

Mr. Slater rose to his feet, applauding Guy. "You must step aside, Lovell, and let Mrs. Cooke have a go. I imagine she's brilliant at fingering."

Aunt Margot's brows snapped together in disapproval, but all others in the room let the innuendo fly past, either from politeness or because they didn't understand the double entendre.

Guy sent Mr. Slater a bland stare. "An excellent idea."

"No," Gemma said at once, rising. "I am nowhere near as talented as you, Lord Guy. Perhaps you could play another piece."

Guy flexed his fingers. "I am always happy to show off, be warned. But here." He pulled out a piece of music from the stack on top of the pianoforte. "I came across this as I sifted through, but it needs four hands. Can you play the upper part while I take the bass?"

Chapter 4

For a moment, Guy thought Gemma would refuse. She flushed, clearly uncomfortable, but as she scanned the sheet, she relaxed a bit. He'd picked a piece whose melody was a fairly easy run of notes, probably purchased for the novice players in the house.

"Now, now," Lord Steven called. "Do not keep her all to yourself, Lovell. Leave the poor chit alone."

Gemma's cheeks burned scarlet at the word *chit*, and she quickly resumed her seat. "By all means," she said in a loud voice. "This will sound grand."

"Excellent," Guy said, trying to put her at her ease. Lord Steven needed to feel the rough edge of Guy's boot. "Shall we?"

Guy's part began the piece, Gemma coming in a few measures later. The music was scored in A minor, which meant no sharps or flats except the occasional accidental. Gemma seemed happy with that. She was a competent player, but her fumbles told Guy she wasn't a prodigy.

Even so, they moved well together through the music. Gemma grew interested in the piece as they went, her body swaying slightly in the chair. Guy's foot worked the pedal beneath, which made his thigh brush her skirt.

The warmth that came to him through the fabric made *his* fingers skip a few notes, which he hoped she did not notice.

The music again raised a barrier between them and the others, muffling the low nasal whine of Lord Steven. The man was an ass. He'd squandered the inheritance his father had been kind enough to bestow on him, though he was a second son, and his brother, a duke, had had enough of him. Lord Steven leered at Gemma, as though she'd fall to her knees and beg him to marry her.

Slater wasn't much better. He had money and was actually careful with it, his only redeeming quality. He leered as well, believing Gemma would fall for his idiotic charms.

Guy's ill-tempered thoughts made him increase his pace, though this section was marked *adagio*—slowly and easily. Gemma glanced at him in puzzlement, and he calmed the tempo.

Pulling his thoughts away from the irritating gentlemen, Guy recognized that he and Gemma harmonized well together. Her arm sometimes touched his when their hands drew close on the keyboard, and thighs contacted as Guy depressed and released the pedal.

Guy decided he'd like to perform a duet with her again. Not here, though, in front of foppish and oafish gentlemen, very young ladies, and Gemma's formidable aunt-in-law. No, he and Gemma would be alone, in candlelight, playing together. The music would grow softer as they wound their way to the end, finish in pianissimo, and then Guy would take Gemma in his arms and kiss her softly.

His heart thumped. He wanted this, wished he could suspend time and float away with Gemma to a place they could be private.

When the devil had he grown so romantic? Guy was the least romantic man he knew. Women—the right sort of women—were for having fun with. They hung on his arm as he played for blood at cards, and he enjoyed a liaison with them afterward, with no promise, on either side, of anything more. Widows seeking entertainment or courtesans who understood the rules of the game were Guy's usual partners.

Gemma was a widow, true, but in spite of the gossip about her—had she hastened her husbands to their graves with her insatiable passion?—he'd never seen her flirting with gentlemen or sending hints that she desired a rendezvous. She'd been married thrice, but her behavior was as innocent as that of her stepdaughter.

Guy caught Gemma glancing sideways at him. The glance took in his entire body, and when their eyes met, her face went brick red.

Aha. So not quite an innocent. Guy sent her a grin, and Gemma looked hurriedly back at the music.

The piece finished. Guy lifted his hands from the keys, rose, and bowed, then lifted Gemma to her feet, presenting her. She curtsied, taking her cue from his playfulness.

"Bravo," Sonia cried. "And brava."

Guy made an exaggerated bow to Gemma and then raised her hand to his lips. He couldn't resist actually touching a kiss to her fingers, loving the softness of them.

To kiss the rest of her, she stretched out next to him, candlelight licking her skin …

Guy released her before he did anything foolish, such as drag her to him and kiss her in front of everyone.

Sonia finished her applause. "Another. Please."

"No, no," Gemma said breathlessly. "I must not afflict you all with more of my unskilled playing."

"Nonsense." Sonia was queen in this room, and she knew it. "It is delightful. Lord Guy, you and Stepmama must play again."

The other ladies and the young gentlemen—Sonia's adoring courtiers—joined in the plea. Gemma gave them a bashful shrug. "Very well. But Lord Guy must choose a simple piece."

Lord Guy was already leafing through the piles of music, delighted that he found several more duets. A few were for two pianofortes, but they could make do with one. They'd have to sit very close, and sometimes their hands would cross …

"I have it." Guy waved the sheets and spread them out across the music stand.

As Gemma seated herself, Guy holding the back of her chair, he noticed Sonia's fleeting but sly smile. Little minx. Had she noted the spark that had jumped in Guy at Gemma's closeness?

They began the music, this time Gemma leading off and Guy joining in.

Guy couldn't help himself. He knew how to entice a lady without words, and he began to make the subtle signals of a man wanting a woman.

He'd just miss Gemma's breasts when he reached a hand to grab a high note, or send her sidelong glances, a smile here, a smile there.

Come with me, my lady, and we shall make lovely music together.

Gemma did not respond as expected. No arch looks or answering smiles, no slight nods to show she understood. Instead, she flushed in confusion and focused her gaze determinedly on the music.

Guy tried to restrain himself, but it was difficult. Gemma was delectable. Her understated blue gown, with the satin sash just below her breasts, was elegant and refined, and the silver earrings she'd donned jingled softly when she moved her head.

Guy found himself wondering how the earrings would taste.

He hit a wrong note, and Gemma sent him a surprised glance. Flushing, Guy forced his attention back to the music.

They finished with no more mishaps and without Guy leaping at Gemma and taking her to the floor. The sensation of her lips on his haunted him, and he wanted more than anything to kiss her again.

Sonia applauded enthusiastically, and Aunt Margot rose. "Excellent, my dears. Sonia, perhaps you can accompany Gemma on the harp. Sonia plays an excellent harp."

Aunt Margot regarded the company genially. Whatever any present truly thought of harp music, they all agreed that listening to Sonia play along with Gemma would be the crowning moment of the afternoon.

Guy relinquished his place, finding a chair among the gentlemen as Sonia settled herself on the harp stool.

They began a simple piece, Gemma playing softly to not drown out the quiet plucking of the harp. The younger gentlemen stared hungrily

at Sonia's plump elbows while Slater and Lord Steven ogled Gemma. Guy would have to do something about their lascivious attentions.

After Sonia finished—to tumultuous applause—Aunt Margot made subtle but understandable hints that the time for calls was over. A gentleman must stay in a lady's home only a certain amount of time, lest any claim his attentions to the young lady were inappropriate.

Lord Steven and Slater tried to linger—they had no interest in Sonia and apparently no worry that her reputation might be smeared by their presence. Guy firmly escorted them to the front door.

That meant that Guy had to leave as well. He herded the grumbling Slater and Lord Steven outside and turned to bow to the ladies of the house who had gathered near the drawing room's open double doors.

"Thank you for accompanying me, Mrs. Cooke. You are a captivating pianist."

Gemma flashed him her heart-melting smile. "If you change your words to *indifferent* pianist, then I will believe you."

"No instrument could be indifferent to your charms, dear lady." Guy inwardly cringed as the words came out of his mouth—had he ever said anything more absurd?

"You are very kind." Gemma curtsied with the same grace she did everything else. "Thank you for attending us, Lord Guy. It was good of you."

Politeness, nothing more in her words. What could Guy expect, when he was bumbling like a naive puppy?

Sonia gave him her soft-voiced farewells, studying Guy with intense interest.

"Good afternoon, Lord Guy." Aunt Margot's strident tones made it clear he was to leave the hall where he'd planted himself like a pole. "So good of you to call."

His command to go. Yet Guy couldn't help but loiter another moment, drinking in Gemma, her shining eyes, her lovely body wrapped in blue silk. When might he delight in her again?

He finally forced himself down the hall and out of the house, to be greeted by wind gusts so common to London. He settled his hat as a particularly strong gust threatened to dislodge it and strode his way toward South Audley Street, which would take him in the direction of home.

Guy had a choice—he could turn his back on Mrs. Cooke and this wonderful afternoon and embrace his bachelor existence wholeheartedly once more, or he could discover which invitations Mrs. Cooke had answered for the rest of the Season and find any excuse to be at those events himself.

A momentous decision indeed.

"WELL, WHAT DO YOU THINK, GEMMA?" Aunt Margot pressed a cup of chocolate to her lips and took a loud slurp.

Gemma and Aunt Margot sat alone in Margot's private parlor, the windows dark with night, Sonia already in bed.

They'd attended the theatre this evening to take in a comedy by Shakespeare. The players on the stage had called to mind Guy in the doublet and breeches that had hugged his muscular body. Gemma had spent much time scanning the audience, seeking a glimpse of Guy and finding none. When Sonia had wished to discuss points of the play afterward, Gemma could remember little about it, including its title.

"About what, Auntie?" Gemma, her teacup suspended in motionless fingers, pulled herself away from her fantasies of Guy in his doublet and tight satin breeches.

"About Lord Guy Lovell, of course."

A flush heated Gemma's face before she could stop it. "Lord Guy?" She fumbled with her teacup and clattered it to the saucer. "I barely know him. I mean, I was introduced to him long ago, and he is a friend of the Duke of Ashford, but …"

"I was not inquiring about his acquaintances, my dear. I know *those,* and I can pry all I need to learn about him from the Duchess of Ashford." Another slurp, Aunt Margot's gray satin turban tilting dangerously forward. "No, I meant, what is your impression?"

"Oh." Gemma hastily raised her cup again and gulped tea. She preferred it to chocolate in the evenings, liking nothing sweet after mid-day. "I— he's— he is gallant, isn't he? Witty, I suppose, though he rather laughs at himself at the same time."

"Mmm." Was Aunt Margot watching her too closely? Knowing Gemma had spent all evening daydreaming about every word, every touch Lord Guy had given her as they'd played the pianoforte together? Not to mention last night's kiss?

"He is a perfectly fine gentleman," Gemma concluded. She could say this without sounding like a swooning girl. Couldn't she?

Aunt Margot peered at her in consternation. "I meant for Sonia. As a suitor. Do you think he will do for her?"

Chapter 5

Gemma dropped her teacup. It clattered to the saucer, which also slid from Gemma's hands, both falling to the wrapper she'd donned after laying aside her theater finery. Tea splashed the wrapper and part of the carpet before the cup and saucer broke with a muffled crash.

"Oh, dear." Gemma started out of her chair. "I am so sorry, Aunt Margot. I have no idea why I am so clumsy."

"Never mind, Gemma. It is of no matter."

Aunt Margot's highly efficient lady's maid and an upstairs maid had scurried in at the sound of the upset in Aunt Margot's sitting room. They had the broken cup and spilled tea cleaned up almost before the sound of the breaking porcelain had faded. Without a word, they sped out of the room once more, closing the door noiselessly behind them.

"More tea?" Aunt Margot calmly reached for the teapot and the extra cup placed on the tray for just such a mishap.

"No, thank you. I have taken far too much already today." Gemma, who'd resumed her seat as the maids disposed of the mess, folded her hands in her lap to keep from fluttering them. Her wrapper had sustained only a few stains near its hem, not enough for Gemma to go in search of another.

"In that case, have you an answer to my question? What do you think of Lord Guy as a match for Sonia?"

"Good heavens, no," Gemma said at once.

Aunt Margot's brows arched over her cup at Gemma's adamant and decisive answer. A minute amount of chocolate clung to her upper lip.

"Though you say he is a perfectly fine gentleman? Gallant? Witty? He also has quite a fortune, I hear."

"He is far too worldly." Gemma could declare this without the least dissemblance. "Sonia needs someone nearer her own age and experience."

"But she does not need a young fool." Aunt Margot slid a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her mouth clean. "An older man who knows something of life is a good choice for a young

woman. Young ladies are so sheltered, they might blunder without guidance."

"Even so." Gemma was sorry she hadn't asked for more tea, wanting to give her hands something to do. "Lord Guy is a bit too old for her."

"May I remind you that your first husband was forty years your senior?"

"My first marriage was arranged by my well-meaning parents. They knew I'd be looked after." Gemma slid her hands into the voluminous pockets of the wrapper where she could hide her balling fists. Her father must have known he and her mother would not live past the first years of Gemma's marriage, making certain she was married to a very wealthy man who asked very little of Gemma in return.

"John was nearly twenty years older," Aunt Margot went on.

"Yes." Gemma closed her lips before she burst out that her second marriage had been different. John Broadbent and she had been good friends in spite of her twenty years to his thirty-eight.

"A large difference in ages is not uncommon," Aunt Margot said. "I would not like to see my nephew's daughter paired with a young fop who runs through her dowry because he wants new boots every week. Lord Guy would do no such thing."

Gemma imagined Guy's comical disparagement of such a fellow and couldn't curb her smile. "Perhaps not. But I would like Sonia to choose. She should not be foisted off on a gentleman *we* decide is good for her. Her happiness is important to me."

Aunt Margot set down her cup and scrutinized Gemma with wise eyes. "Tell me, Gemma. Was your first marriage happy?"

"It was not *un*happy," Gemma admitted. Hugh Pitts, her first husband, had been kind in his own way, though Gemma had felt very much like his granddaughter and not his wife. He'd had no interest in the bedroom and had said so the first night, much to young Gemma's relief. "I was more his companion than anything else. Read to him on his sickbed and made certain he wanted for nothing."

"Do not worry. I have no intention of pairing Sonia with an elderly gentleman in need of a nursemaid. I am merely making a point. Now, your second marriage. Happy or unhappy?"

"Happy." No need to think it through before she answered. John Broadbent had been congenial, learned but not supercilious, and he'd had much common sense. He'd preferred to sit by the fire and read most nights, with Gemma and her needlework near. Other young ladies might have found life with John dull, but Gemma had been content. She'd found a dear friend in Sonia, who was only eight years her junior, as well as a friend and mother figure in Aunt Margot.

“Yes, my nephew was a sensible man. A credit to his father.” Aunt Margot spoke warmly. “Now, your third marriage. Happy or unhappy?”

Gemma grimaced, a dart of pain in her heart. “You know I was miserable. Mr. Cooke turned my head, and I made a terrible mistake. You warned me, and I was heedless, to my regret.”

“Exactly.” Aunt Margot gave her a decided nod. “Your first two marriages were made with the guidance of family.” Aunt Margot had had a hand in bringing John and Gemma together. “Your last, on your own whim. Therefore, you and I plotting Sonia’s future is not a cruel or strange thing to do. I have every intention of soliciting her opinion in the matter as well, but we should not let her rush off with the first handsome gentleman who quickens her heartbeat.”

“I agree.” Gemma’s heart had banged furiously all afternoon, and did so at every thought of Guy. “Which brings me back to my assessment of Lord Guy. I stand by my conviction that he is too worldly. He would want to rush about to his club, the opera, fancy-dress balls, and racing meets with his friends rather than sit down to tame meals at home. He might break Sonia’s heart.”

“Possibly.” Aunt Margot watched Gemma rather too closely. “He seems to have a good head on his shoulders, however. As does Sonia.”

“That is no certainty they will rub along well together.” Gemma tried to speak without a quaver. “Sonia barely noticed him today, and not at all at the ball last night.”

“True, but she was surrounded by too many young fellows both at the ball and in our drawing room. Perhaps we should make certain we meet Lord Guy at the theatre or musicales or wherever he can be found. Let Sonia come to know him and make up her own mind.”

Gemma did not answer. She recalled how she’d scoured the theatre’s audience tonight, hoping Lord Guy would be in attendance, and her acute disappointment when she’d seen no sign of him. Aunt Margot’s scheme would assure that Gemma would be in proximity to Lord Guy often, perhaps near enough to discuss an opera with him, or to seize his arm in an exciting moment at Ascot, or dance with him at a supper ball.

The purpose of these meetings would be for Guy and Sonia to become better acquainted, Gemma reminded herself with force. Not for Gemma to enjoy his company.

“The Duchess of Ashford,” Aunt Margot said abruptly. Gemma jerked her attention from the enticing vision of hanging on Guy’s arm as they strolled the exhibits at Egyptian House. “Helena. I know she adores making a match, and I know the two of you are good friends. Ask her to arrange an outing with Lord Guy, whether with us or somewhere we can chance upon him. Yes, that will do nicely.”

Gemma's heart sank. Helena did indeed enjoy matchmaking. If she believed Guy and Sonia should be wed, she'd drive them together with the force of a galloping steed.

However, if Gemma demurred from recruiting Helena's help, Aunt Margot would demand to know why. Aunt Margot would poke until she pried the lid from Gemma's box of emotions, revealing that she'd already formed a passion for Lord Guy herself.

That would never do. As Helena was to matchmaking, Aunt Margot was for arranging people's lives. Aunt Margot had done everything she could to dissuade Gemma from marrying Rupert Cooke. In the end, she'd sighed and wished Gemma the best, and then had been the first at Gemma's side to comfort her when Rupert had died in a tragic farce.

Gemma did not want to disappoint Aunt Margot again when this was only a case of girlish silliness.

"Very well." Gemma removed her hands from her pockets and smoothed out the dressing gown. "I will seek Helena's advice."

"Excellent. Just the thing." Aunt Margot beamed at her, lifted her cup of chocolate, and took a satisfied gulp.

GUY LIT a cheroot and leaned back in the comfortable chair in a small chamber at Brooks's club. He'd found a relatively quiet corner here by the fire, away from the noise of the card room, where gentlemen won and lost fortunes in the space of a moment.

In another part of London, Gemma Cooke, who'd attended the theatre tonight with her stepdaughter and aunt-in-law, now must be home preparing to retire. Guy tried and failed to keep his thoughts from straying to Gemma unlacing her dressing gown and letting it fall, firelight silhouetting her body through a thin nightdress. Tried not to imagine her sliding beneath the covers, resting her head with a little sigh, her hair in a thick braid flowing across the pillows, her breasts rising as she drew a breath.

He took a furious puff of the cheroot and willed his body to calm.

Guy knew Gemma had been to the theatre because Helena Ashford had mentioned it when he'd seen her earlier this evening.

Helena had smiled widely after she'd casually relayed this interesting fact, then kissed Guy's cheek, fluttering away with a lovesick Ash behind her. Lovesick Ash appeared to most people very much like the usual Ash, but Guy, who knew him well, had noted how Ash's gaze followed his wife, his eyes soft.

Ash had fallen like a giant oak in a gale for the chatty Helena, and good thing too. Ash might have forced himself to marry an insipid

stick in order to give his three children a mother, which would have been a tragedy.

Good thing Ash hadn't found Gemma first, or he might have fallen hard for her instead. Guy would have had to bow out, brokenhearted.

Guy stared into the fire's red and gold flames as he examined this feeling. He, brokenhearted. Over a woman.

It was not possible. He would not allow it.

Guy had proved his self-control by retiring to his club and studiously *not* rushing to Covent Garden tonight on the chance he'd encounter Gemma.

He had no need to sit in her box, hold her fan, laugh at her quips about what played on the stage, or steal his fingers to her hand in her lap.

No, much better that he hunched in a sitting room at Brooks's and envisioned her smile, the sparkle in her eyes, her lilting voice, while he smoked his throat raw. Much, much better choice.

"Is it you, Lovell?" The slurred voice of Hector Wakefield interrupted Guy's reverie.

Guy jerked himself from his contemplations with an ill-tempered growl. "You have been asking me this each time you see me, Wakefield. How is your eyesight? Or is the port to blame?"

"Always so droll." Wakefield heaved himself onto a settee, removed a flask from his coat, and took a heavy dollop. "Are you not rushing about pursuing the lovely Mrs. Cooke? I heard of your performance in her drawing room. Or has she forbidden you the door for too many wrong notes? Ha ha."

Guy restrained himself from rising and punching Wakefield in the nose. "I think we should not speak about the lovely Mrs. Cooke."

Wakefield waved his flask. "On the contrary, I think we should speak much of her. If you have no wish for her, old boy, then kindly step out of the way. I cannot lay hands on her with you always beside her."

Guy's rage bubbled up inside him swiftly and strongly. "Careful, Wakefield."

"About what?" Wakefield pulled out a cheroot and lit it from the candle beside him. The lock of hair he let droop poetically to his forehead nearly ignited.

"Do not speak of Mrs. Cooke," Guy said in a hard voice. "Do not speak *to* her. Do not even walk near her."

Wakefield's eyes widened. "Good Lord, Lovell. Are you saying you have a tendresse for dear Gemma?" He snorted with laughter. "Is she your mistress then? Sir Ronald Pugh seemed to think so."

Guy stifled a snarl. Sir Ronald's gossip could damage Gemma's reputation faster than fire through a dry field.

“No,” Guy said firmly. “Mrs. Cooke is a family friend, and I do not like to hear her name bandied about. I’d feel the same about my own sister, had I one.” A lie, and Guy knew it. The dreams he’d had about Gemma last night were definitely *not* sisterly.

“Well, then, if you have no claim on her, perhaps I will offer her a chance for entertainment.” Wakefield drew on the cheroot and sent a thoughtful wisp of smoke to the ceiling. “She must be starved for it. A year she’s gone without a husband, when she likes husbands so very much.”

Guy clenched his fingers around his own cheroot. “You plan to propose to her, do you?”

“Pardon?” Wakefield coughed. “No, indeed, no indeed. I’m no more a marrying chap than you are. I mean, I’ll have a tumble with her, if you want to be so crude. More than one. She’s a fetching woman.”

“Family friend, remember?” Guy’s voice held steel. “The same as my own sister.”

“Oh, very well, I’ll tumble your sister too, into the bargain. If you’re such friends with Mrs. Cooke, tell her she can look forward to a mighty ramrod.”

Guy was out of his chair, cheroot in a bowl, before Wakefield’s laughter had faded.

Lord Guy Lovell had fashioned himself into an uncaring man-about-Town, living for whatever was on offer, from horse racing to dice to beautiful women. But once upon a time, he’d been a cavalry officer, hardened by the long war against Napoleon and his years in Iberia. The things he’d seen at Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz had made him decide to put aside violence and embrace the soft things in life—wine, women, music.

Now Wakefield’s disgusting words about Gemma, delivered with an idiotic grin, brought the man of violence inside Guy to life.

In the next moment, Wakefield hung in his grip, Guy’s hard fists around the lapels of his coat. Wakefield’s face went purple over his tightening cravat.

“As I said, Wakefield. You will not speak of her, or to her, or ever go nigh her. Do you understand?”

“Damn you, Lovell.” Wakefield wheezed. “You’ll regret laying hands on me.”

“You’ll regret your tongue speaking Mrs. Cooke’s name.”

Wakefield continued to gasp. Guy finally set him down with a thump of Wakefield’s boots, feeling both satisfied and amazed at himself. The amiable Guy Lovell did not lose his temper and attack other gentlemen.

The amiable Guy had now spent time with the beautiful Gemma

Cooke.

Guy abandoned his cheroot and brandy and quit the room without a farewell. He feared he'd kill Wakefield if he remained.

Behind him, Wakefield drew ragged breaths. "We'll meet for this," he rasped. "Name your seconds, Lovell."

"Speak to Ashford," Guy threw over his shoulder, and strode down the empty hall.

Chapter 6

Guy hadn't regained his equanimity by the time he'd descended to the lower floor. He had no idea where he was going, if anywhere. Part of him wanted to rush back upstairs and dash Wakefield's face to the floor, the other wanted to race into the misty London air and seek out Gemma.

To speak to her, look upon her, bathe his senses in her. Even simply thinking about her was making him feel better.

What the devil was the matter with him?

"Sir?" The obsequious footman who took coats at the front door and wheedled large tips from the patrons sidled up to Guy. "Your great-uncle is asking for you, my lord. He's in the back drawing room."

The footman's palm hovered. Guy let out a small sigh and dropped a shilling into it. Far more than the man or his information was worth, but Guy didn't have time to sift through his coins to find a lesser one.

"Thank you, my lord." The footman's gushing words followed Guy. At least the man would not misplace Guy's coat tonight.

"Uncle Clem." Guy greeted his great-uncle, who was as usual buried in a deep armchair near the fireplace in a small drawing room. The shadows in this room were dark, the fire throwing spangled light over Uncle Clem's white stockings. Uncle Clem insisted on wearing breeches, not liking the new fashion of garments that reached the ankle.

"Ah, Guy. My dear boy."

Clement Lovell was Guy's late father's uncle, brother to Guy's grandfather. Uncle Clem had always been fond of Guy, as both of them were second sons. *The Spares,* Uncle Clem called them. *We must hang together.*

"You wished to see me?" Guy asked as Uncle Clem relapsed into silence.

"Yes, yes indeed." Uncle Clem lifted a racing newspaper from the table at his side. "I have a very important question for you."

Guy took a chair facing him, leaning forward, hands on thighs. "I am all ears, sir."

Uncle Clem rattled the paper. “This new horse, Glorious Reign. What do you think of his chances at Epsom?”

An important question indeed. Guy pushed aside his impatience to answer. “He has good form for a youngster, but I’d not wager heavily on him.”

“No? Good. Good. Well, thank you.”

Uncle Clem laid the paper aside and took a long drink of brandy.

“Was that all?” Guy asked. His body was unclenching in the peaceful atmosphere of the chamber. A good natter with Uncle Clem might let him forget his troubles, remind him of who he was. Family bachelors together.

“Pardon?” Uncle Clem blinked at him. “Oh, yes. Indeed. That was my question. Thank you, my boy. You’ve settled my mind. I’ll place only a small wager.” Another gulp of brandy. “Now.” Uncle Clem’s eyes took on a roguish twinkle. “What about this Cooke woman, eh? Does she have good form?”

Guy regarded him in stunned dismay. “Uncle …”

“Do not put your back up, young Guy. I heard tell of you prancing about with her and taking her out to the terrace at Whitwell’s famous ball. Ronald Pugh talks much. I remember the gel—married to Hugh Pitts. I was at school with Pitts. Not much form there at all. No stamina either. He likely dropped dead at the mere thought of climbing into bed with her.”

Guy held on to his temper with effort. “Uncle, please do not disparage Mrs. Cooke. I’ve nearly just strangled Wakefield for the same thing.”

Uncle Clem widened his dark eyes, so like Guy’s own. “No disparagement meant, boy. I speak the truth. Pitts was not a good match for her. Broadbent was better, but still not the thing. The last one—Cooke—was ghastly. I was at school with *his* grandfather, a terrible bully. Whole family was a menace. All died young from carelessness too.” Uncle Clem breathed a laugh and drank more brandy. “Wakefield, eh? I dare say he deserved it. Good for you.”

“He’s called me out over it.”

Uncle Clem chortled. “Well, that needn’t trouble you. He’s a rotten shot.”

“I know.” Guy laced his fingers together. “I’ve stirred up gossip, haven’t I?”

“You have. Best put it to rest. Pot Wakefield in the arm, teach him a lesson. Then either marry the gel or have nothing more to do with her.”

“Marry?” Guy stared in shock.

“That is what I said.” Uncle Clem reached for the paper again. “Can’t let the old fusspots make a meal of her reputation, can you?”

He opened the newspaper and squinted at it, but his eyes didn't move. "Never bothered with it myself, marriage. Couldn't be troubled. No time for all that nonsense."

He cleared his throat as he shook out the paper and turned a page, finished with the topic.

Guy sat silently. For the first time in his life, he sensed Uncle Clem's profound sadness, a loneliness his uncle perhaps didn't realize he possessed.

Uncle Clem had traveled the world and done as he pleased in his youth. In his middle age he began to live life in a fixed groove, writing his letters in the morning and spending the rest of the day at his club, in this very room. No one else would dare sit in his chair. He remained here until time for supper, which he took in the dining room, played a hand or two of cards, returned to this chamber to read newspapers, and then went back home to be put to bed by his valet. In the morning, he rose and did it all over again.

After a time, neither man speaking, Guy said a gentle farewell. Uncle Clem grunted his repeated thanks for the racing tip, the newspaper not lowering.

Guy fetched his coat from the footman—who fussed around him, hoping for another coin—and settled it on his shoulders as he walked into the cool night.

Was Uncle Clem's life what he had to look forward to? Guy clapped on his hat and turned his steps for Piccadilly and his rooms at Albany. A chair dubbed his own at Brooks's, where deciding what horse to wager on was the most important event of the day?

Damn it all, he was growing morose. Guy bent his head into the wind and willed all maudlin and vexing thoughts to disappear. The image of Gemma, and the memory of her kisses on his lips, refused to go away.

HELENA ASHFORD PROVED to be only too delighted to arrange an outing in which Sonia could mingle—well-guarded, of course—with suitable bachelors, including Guy Lovell.

I am pleased you have brought me into your confidence, Helena wrote in an eager letter to Gemma. *The weather is fine, the racing season is here—what a perfect excuse for the gentlemen to come to view Ash's bloodstock. Ash has a small house in Surrey where he brings his horses to train for the Derby and Ascot. Young men are agog for horseflesh, and we ladies will be there to cool them with conversation and a meal. Do say you will join us. The children would be pleased to see you.*

I remain, yours in haste,

Helena Ashford

Two days after Gemma received this letter, she, Aunt Margot, an excited Sonia, and Gemma's grumbling stepson Tristan, traveled by chaise to Surrey and the Duke of Ashford's home near Epsom.

Ashford had a far grander estate at his seat in Somerset, but what Helena had termed a "small house," was a large, square abode made of golden stone with columns lining a great portico under which the carriage halted.

Tristan ceased his frowning as they alighted and were hailed by Ashford, Guy, and several of Sonia's young suitors.

"At least I won't have to natter with all these gels," he muttered before he greeted Ashford with deference.

"What a lovely home," Sonia exclaimed as Helena emerged to meet the ladies.

"Why thank you, my dear. Ash and I adore it, and the children have plenty of room to romp."

Helena had blossomed as the wife of her beloved Ash. She positively glowed with pleasure and love.

And something more, Gemma thought to herself as she cast her eyes below Helena's sash. Helena caught the glance and smiled happily. "Yes, indeed," she whispered, pressing Gemma's arm. "The little one will be with us by winter."

Ashford had three children, two girls and a boy, from his previous marriage, all who loved Helena as their new mother.

"A full house," Gemma said, beaming her a smile.

"Indeed. I hope for a little boy so Lewis will have a playmate, but a girl would be lovely too."

Sonia's eyes were starry. "How wonderful for you, Your Grace."

"The only trouble is, Ash fusses around me quite intensely. He is certain I'll come to grief, but I am quite robust."

Helena looked it. Childless Gemma envied Helena at the same time she was happy for her friend.

Guy turned from greeting Tristan to face them. "Ash will have his own cricket team soon," he joked.

Helena shook her head but did not look displeased. "Hardly."

Gemma forced her gaze from Guy, but she could not help noticing he was splendid in riding gear, boots hugging his legs to the knee, his coat setting off his broad shoulders and trim torso. A man who kept himself in the pink of health.

"Now then, it's a beautiful day," Helena said. "You gentlemen ought to have a good gallop while we ladies take tea in the sunshine."

"Gemma enjoys a good gallop," Sonia said brightly. "She is an excellent horsewoman."

"She is indeed," Aunt Margot put in. "My nephew could scarcely

keep her feet on the ground whenever they stayed at his country house. She misses riding so. Gemma, do go. I am certain Lord Guy and His Grace will look after you."

Gemma spent a moment wondering why Aunt Margot encouraged this activity, and concluded she wished Gemma to extol Sonia's good qualities to Guy out of Sonia's hearing. Her heart gave a throbbing ache.

"It was a long journey," she began.

"Nonsense." Aunt Margot's chocolate brown turban nodded along with her. "There was hardly enough time for a good nap in the carriage. Do change into your habit and go, Gemma. You have been cooped up in the house for too long. It will do you good."

"Yes, it will do you good, Stepmama," Sonia echoed.

"Yes, indeed," Helena put in, abruptly abandoning her offer of tea. "Enjoy the glorious day, Gemma."

"I promise to saddle a suitable steed for you, Mrs. Cooke." Guy's smile touched her with warmth. "Several other ladies are ready to ride as well, so you will not be entirely at our mercy."

Gemma was not certain to be relieved or distressed that she could not ride out alone with Guy.

What was the matter with her? Of course, she would be joining a group of ladies and gentlemen for a quiet hack over the meadows. Nothing scandalous about such an activity. This would not be a romantic outing, but one for exercise, plus the opportunity to pepper the conversation with praise of Sonia.

It was clear that Margot, Sonia, and Helena would pester her until she agreed. Aunt Margot wished her to soften up Guy, and Sonia doubtless needed a respite from Gemma. They'd spent the last two days going over Sonia's wardrobe for this sojourn plus the remainder of the Season, which had them too much in each other's pockets.

"Very well." Gemma suppressed a sigh.

"Excellent," Guy said. "I will hie myself to the stable and choose a horse for you. At your service, Mrs. Cooke. Miss Broadbent. Mrs. Spencer." He made a bow to each of them, his eyes twinkling at Aunt Margot. "An even higher turban today, I see. I stand in awe of you, madam."

"Go on with you, silly boy." Aunt Margot flapped a hand at him, but her cheeks were pink with enjoyment.

Within the hour, Gemma, in her dark blue riding habit and hat, was seated on a sturdy young hunter called Rose—named by Ash's daughter Evie. Rose took Gemma at a steady walk out of the stable yard to the path that led across fields and down to the river beyond Ash's demesne.

Eight riders in all trotted along the trail that edged the farmlands,

a mix of Ash's and Helena's friends who had come to enjoy a brief holiday from London. Ash led the way, and Guy brought up the rear.

Gemma rode directly in front of Guy and behind another lady. Perhaps it was best she was positioned so, or she'd be staring fixedly at Guy's strong hips the entire journey. Even so, she found frequent excuses to turn and look back at him.

Guy rode very well. Gemma could see the cavalry officer in him in the way he sat, his horse responding to his subtlest command.

Gemma admitted to herself that her gaze went most often to his thighs outlined by tight leather breeches.

Once they were clear of farmer's fields, Ash picked up a faster pace across a meadow dotted with spring flowers. Lambs followed ewes in the distance, like tiny white clouds in a vast green sky.

"How is your mount?" Guy asked behind her.

Gemma patted Rose's neck. "She is delightful." The mare, a bay, had a luxurious black mane that warmed Gemma's gloved hands. "A fine choice. I thank you."

Guy sped his horse a few steps to pull beside hers. Again, Gemma noted how effortlessly Guy rode. His right knee came very close to her habit's skirt, but she never feared the horses would collide.

As he continued beside her, Gemma cast about for something witty to say, then realized after a few moments that the silence between them was comfortable. Companionable.

She glanced at Guy and found him studying her, a smile hovering about his mouth.

"Lord Guy?"

He gave a small start as though unaware he'd been staring at her. "Forgive me, my dear. I was admiring your fetching hat. Very different from your aunt's interesting millinery."

Gemma laughed. "Aunt Margot loves her turbans. It was a joke between her and her husband, Mr. Spencer, to see how absurd she could concoct them before she dared not wear them out of the house. She keeps them now to honor his memory."

"That is charmingly romantic," Guy said in surprise. "I will be more respectful of them in future."

They'd fallen behind the other riders, who were trotting swiftly away, rising and falling in their saddles, bobbing like ducklings on a pond.

Guy seemed in no hurry to catch up to them, content to walk along with Gemma, grasses swishing past their horses' hooves.

"Aunt Margot is a blessing," Gemma said, her heart warming. "A very kind woman."

"Who does not let kindness stand in the way of her opinions." Guy flashed a grin. "I like her."

"She has been good to me."

"The entire Broadbent family has embraced you, it seems."

"That is true." Gemma patted Rose's neck. "I was happy when married to Mr. Broadbent, as short a time as it turned out to be."

Guy's smile vanished. "Forgive me. I did not mean to be flippant about a tragedy. I meant that the family absorbed you and did not send you away once you were again alone."

"Yes, I was quite lucky." Aunt Margot and Sonia had embraced her again after her disastrous marriage to Rupert. "My stepson is kind too, in his own way. Tristan enjoys complaining, but he has a good heart."

"I am pleased to hear it. I know Tristan from my club. Not as dour as he makes out. He gets along well with my great-uncle, who is another false curmudgeon."

"Sonia is well looked after." *There.* Gemma had introduced Sonia into the conversation without it sounding awkward.

"Indeed, she is. She is fortunate to have a great-aunt and a stepmother guarding her, but not so closely as to break her spirit." Guy's approving gaze was flattering.

"She is a charming girl." Gemma could say this without feigning praise. "Very accomplished. When I was a debutante, I rather let myself be pushed this way and that. Not because I thought it my duty, but because I was so green I feared to misstep. And also because I found the world fascinating. So many interesting people to meet, interesting things to see. I thought as a matron I'd have still more opportunity for life, so I accepted my parents' wish for me to marry Mr. Pitts. I was quite pleased to be a wife."

She'd been more stifled than she'd realized she would be, but that had mostly been because of Hugh's ill health. Widowhood had bewildered her at first, but she'd then realized what freedom it gave her. She no longer had the constraints of a debutante, nor was derided as a spinster, nor was restricted by a husband.

And why did she babble about her first marriage to Guy? She wanted him to understand her, she supposed, but it had nothing to do with Sonia.

"Alas, I have a different view of marriage from you." Guy's mouth turned down in mock sorrow. "Though perhaps that is not a diplomatic thing to say to a lady."

"Why not? You should live your life as you choose." Gemma stated this firmly. "Your unmarried state has done you no harm. Though a gentleman enjoys being single more than a lady, it is true."

Guy studied the remote distance. "Being an unmarried gent is not the happy condition all take it to be, unfortunately. For instance, mamas corner me in ballrooms with hopes I will suddenly succumb to their daughters' charms, such as Lady Wilding did at the ball the other

night. My married friends leave off inviting me to their homes, believing I will find their everyday lives monotonous. I fear I will end up sitting in the same chair in a darkened room at a tedious club, day after day, reading the racing news and drinking port the rest of my life." A shadow flickered in his eyes, or perhaps it was a cloud passing overhead.

Gemma flashed a brief smile "That does sound dire. I suppose you had better marry to avoid such a fate and garner invitations to dine with your friends. I will point out immediately that Sonia is very accomplished and poised to wed."

"Sonia?" Guy stared at Gemma in bafflement, any glimpse into his true self gone. "I mean, Miss Broadbent. Why on earth would you try to push your poor stepdaughter into marriage with *me*?"

"Well, she …" Gemma groped for words. She ought to have ignored Aunt Margot's needling about Guy, but it was too late now. "Sonia speaks highly of you," she tried. "She might be forming a tendresse for you."

Guy's bafflement grew to astonishment. "A tendresse? I hardly think so. When I visited last week, she never looked at me, no matter how flowingly and earnestly I played the pianoforte."

"No?" Gemma faltered, heat rising as she remembered the quick, intimate brushes of their arms and thighs as they'd performed the duets. "I thought Sonia quite taken with you."

"Forgive me if I insult you, Mrs. Cooke, but have you run mad? Besides, how could you have known how often Miss Broadbent did or did not glance at me, when you were staring at the music?"

"Of course she—" Gemma halted the words, her face scalding. "Very well, you've caught me. Aunt Margot thought you would suit Sonia, and she instructed me to smooth the way for the match."

"*Aunt Margot* thought I would suit?" Guy studied her in such amazement that Gemma fought back the hysterical urge to laugh.

"Now that I think it through, the idea is absurd," Gemma said hastily. "I did protest when Aunt Margot first mentioned it, but she talked me into the notion." Gemma hadn't been convinced but didn't want to insult Guy by confessing how vehemently she'd protested.

They had reached a stand of trees that lined the river. The other riders, far ahead of them now, had followed another trail downstream into open country.

Guy abruptly steered his horse into Gemma's and pushed them under the shelter of the trees. Gemma's horse obeyed Guy without resistance.

Before Gemma could ask what he was doing, Guy had vaulted down from his horse, stepped to hers, and pulled her out of her saddle. Gemma landed against him, his hard body beneath his coat

sending her heart pounding.

"Talked you into the notion?" Guy's voice was harsh, the affable, teasing gentleman vanishing. A hard-eyed man stood in his place, the soldier who had bravely faced the formidable armies of Bonaparte. "How the devil can I think about your very young stepdaughter, madam, when my thoughts are only for you? How can I think of *any* other lady after I'd set eyes on you, and found the most beautiful woman I'd ever beheld?"

As Gemma gaped, Guy scooped her against him. He jerked her hat's netting out of the way, tilted her head back, and pressed a fierce kiss to her mouth.

Chapter 7

Guy's frustrated anger dissolved into intense need as he kissed Gemma. And kissed her. He parted her lips, thumbs on the corners of her mouth, opening her to him like a blossom.

She should have pushed him away, even slapped him for his boldness. Instead, she sank her fingers into his coat and pulled him closer, receiving his kisses and returning them with vigor.

Her loosened hat slid off and landed at their feet, making one of the horses step back with a start. Gemma didn't notice, but she made a desperate sound as Guy threaded his fingers through her hair.

He slid his other hand to her hip, splaying fingers across the warm broadcloth of her habit. Her flesh beneath the skirt was firm, yet soft. Guy wanted more than anything to pull her bare body to his in the heat of his bed, to lose himself in her warmth.

"You are beauty itself," Guy whispered as the kiss finally ended. He lingered near her lips. "I gazed upon you, and I was lost."

Gemma's eyes, the blue of a deep lake, widened, as though surprised he thought these things.

"Guy …"

"She speaks my name. No *Lord* attached. She gives me hope."

"I only wish—"

"What?" Guy traced her lower lip with his thumb. "What do you wish, my darling?" He held his breath, praying she would not return to the astounding topic of him marrying her stepdaughter.

"For you to kiss me again."

He relaxed into a hot smile. "Words worth obeying."

Guy bent to the kiss, closing his arms all the way around her. They swayed together as he tasted her mouth, Gemma exploring him as much as he did her. Her fingers traveled across his shoulders to his back and down to rest on his waist.

Guy nipped her lower lip and then her chin, wanting to laugh for the sheer joy of kissing her.

Gemma was no shy miss. She knew how to kiss, and from the heat in her eyes, she knew where these heady kisses might lead. The way she melded her body to his, let her fingers wander to his breeches, and

returned his nips told him she wanted this encounter to take them to the next and exciting step.

What a liaison he could have with her! Guy's very active imagination put them there, in a bed with lush hangings where they would revel in each other all night, perhaps pausing for a refreshing sip of wine, a nibble of summer strawberries laced with sweet cream. He would have to find this bedroom, which was neither in his bachelor flat or her prim and full town house—

The fantasy spun on as he continued to kiss her, she kissing him back in growing hunger.

The hard thump of approaching hoofbeats made Gemma gasp. She jerked from Guy in alarm, slipped on the muddy ground, and was righted by Guy's steadying hand.

"Futchells," she exclaimed in a whisper.

She swept down and retrieved her hat, regarding it in dismay as she brushed damp leaves from the silk.

A single horse came at them from the meadow, the rider making straight for their trysting place.

Sonia, in riding habit and hat very much like Gemma's, swerved her horse under the trees and halted competently a few feet from Guy, Gemma, and their mounts.

"There are a great lot of people riding this way," she said breathlessly. "I will distract them, but you must be quick."

She made a neat turn and urged her mount into a canter. Horse and rider flowed from the trees and back to the meadow path, joining riders who were, as Sonia had warned, heading their way.

Guy seized Gemma's hand. "Timely advice. Shall we flee?"

"Yes, I think we'd better." Gemma's face was flushed, and she looked everywhere but straight at Guy.

He quickly boosted Gemma into her saddle. She righted her hat, though the veil hung free, Guy's impatience to kiss her having torn it loose.

Guy sprang to his horse, turning and guiding Gemma out of the little wood. He contrived things so that they were trotting sedately side by side up the path when the other riders poured at them.

He used the movement of adjusting his hat to lean to Gemma. "You and I will speak later, my love."

"Do you think we ought to?" Gemma's eyes glistened, the blue of them piercing his heart.

"Oh, yes. Why should we not?"

Her mouth curved into a glorious smile. "Because we always kiss when we do."

Guy's heart sped, and a deluge of warmth flooded him. "All the more reason to seek each other out. Now, let us behave like prim

chaperones and ride with your stepdaughter."

"An excellent suggestion."

They slowed and waited for Sonia, who trotted to them as though surprised and delighted she'd caught up to them.

Guy noted the smug expression on Sonia's face, no trace of jealousy to be found. For a debutante who'd caught her potential suitor kissing her stepmother, she appeared inordinately pleased.

GEMMA BARELY SAW Guy after they rejoined the riders, the gentlemen absorbing him while Gemma and Sonia were surrounded by the ladies.

Back at the house, Guy was swept from Gemma by a tide of his cronies all too happy for the opportunity to talk horse amongst themselves. The Duke of Ashford's stables held fine horseflesh, which could occupy conversation for hours.

During supper that night, Gemma found herself seated a long way from Guy. Interestingly, so was Sonia. Guy's supper partner was Aunt Margot.

After the meal, Gemma withdrew with the ladies to the drawing room, and the gentlemen did not join them until late.

No sooner had the gentlemen entered—most wearing resigned expressions that they'd had to leave behind port, cheroots, and foul language for tea and polite conversation—when Helena declared herself tired and said it was time for the ladies to retire. None disputed with their hostess, and the ladies departed en masse. A few of the gentlemen looked relieved.

Gemma caught Guy's gaze as she strolled from the drawing room, arm-in-arm with Sonia. Guy regarded her neutrally, one acquaintance to another, but her heart sped at the glint deep in his eyes.

She spent a wakeful night vividly recalling Guy's decadent kiss, his touch gliding along her body, the firmness of his thighs under her hands. She half hoped he'd find a way to slip into her bedroom, clad only in nightshirt and dressing gown, pressing quieting fingers to her lips as he slipped into her bed.

The fantasies that scenario engendered made sleep impossible.

Alas, Guy did not visit her in the night, and in the morning, she discovered he had departed for London even before Gemma and her family had descended for breakfast.

Helena, who'd relayed the information, seemed to find nothing odd in Guy's behavior. In fact, she said nothing further about Guy as she assisted Gemma's party for their return to London, and strangely, neither did Aunt Margot.

As for Sonia, she remained mute on the subject of Guy kissing Gemma, projecting an air of innocence that bordered on the vapid. Sonia continued this uncharacteristic vacuousness in the Broadbent chaise all the way to London. Aunt Margot remained quiet, a peculiar smile hovering about her mouth.

Only Tristan was talkative, unusually so. “The duke is a gracious host, ain’t he?” He almost beamed. “His Grace has invited me to sit in his box at Newmarket and again at Goodwood. An excellent man, is the duke. Most excellent. The very picture of a gentleman.”

Aunt Margot shot both Gemma and Sonia a glance that begged them not to laugh.

“Lord Guy Lovell, now,” Tristan rattled on. “The duke’s closest friend—he is an excellent gentleman as well. I know Lord Guy from my club. He gave me many tips on the Derby and told me he’d have the butler at Brooks’s put aside a bottle of the best port for me. What a fine visit we’ve had.”

Gemma’s face heated, and she prayed the shadows of the carriage hid her flush. Sonia’s lips twitched mightily before she turned her head to look out the window.

Not until they were safely at home in Grosvenor Square and unpacking was Gemma able to corner Sonia. She charged into Sonia’s bedchamber, asked the startled maid to go help Aunt Margot, and took over tidying Sonia’s gowns.

“I did not realize you’d suddenly found a penchant for riding.” Gemma folded a linen fichu with jerky movements.

“Oh, I fancied a canter. Good thing for you I did, was it not?” Sonia’s eyes twinkled, she not in the least upset that she’d found Gemma in Guy’s arms.

“Need I beg you to keep silent?” Gemma tossed the folded fichu on top of an unfolded one and snatched up a pair of stockings. “Though I realize that if you had wished to betray me, you already would have done so.”

“Never.” Sonia made a locking motion over her lips. “Do you love him?”

The stockings became knotted under Gemma’s agitated fingers. She abandoned them and sank to the bench at the foot of the bed. “My dear, I have given up such things.”

“But you mustn’t.” Sonia quickly sat beside her and took Gemma’s cold hands in her warm ones. “I saw you when you played the pianoforte with Lord Guy, and the night before that when you danced with him at Lady Whitwell’s ball. You sparkled. I have not seen that sparkle in you since my father died.”

Gemma swallowed. “I’ve fancied myself in love before, remember? With Mr. Cooke. It was a disaster.”

“You were young and reeling from losing my father. That was different.”

“Was it?” Gemma blinked her stinging eyes. “Are there degrees of difference in being foolish over a gentleman?”

Sonia squeezed her hands, her voice gentling. “Of course, it is different. You were starving for comfort after my father died, and you were defiant toward all warnings against Mr. Cooke. Now you are resisting your true feelings for a fine man. Even Tristan likes Lord Guy.”

“Tristan was won over with horseracing and the promise of good port,” Gemma said disparagingly.

“Why should the Duke of Ashford and Lord Guy extend such bounty to Tristan? So you will admire them? Or because they are simply generous?”

Because Helena had likely put them up to it. But Sonia had a point. The Duke of Ashford was his own man and wouldn’t invite Tristan to his box at racing meets simply because his wife nagged him.

“Tristan is not a bad fellow,” Gemma admitted. “Once you get to know him.”

“Exactly. They liked him and offered. Neither the duke nor Lord Guy show any snobbery that Tristan is not of the peerage.”

Gemma sighed. “This is a pointless conversation.”

She tried to withdraw her hands, but Sonia would not release them.

“It is not. Lord Guy is a good man. Even Aunt Margot, the stickler, respects him. Why not let yourself love him?”

Gemma relaxed under Sonia’s grip. “My darling Sonia, you were still a child when I fell for Mr. Cooke. I was as silly then as I am being now. I have no wish to make another mistake. Nor do I want to leave you again.”

“Nonsense. I was not so much a child that I did not understand why you married Mr. Cooke. And you will not be leaving me. You and Lord Guy will have a lovely big house, and I and Aunt Margot will stay with you quite often. I heard that Lord Guy has decided to purchase the duke’s house—the one we just visited. It is not part of the duke’s entail but something he acquired a few years ago.”

Gemma had not known about this, but she had noticed Guy and Ash wandering the halls of the house, examining walls, studying the ceilings.

“Sonia, darling.” Gemma’s cheeks warmed. “I hesitate to speak of something so untoward, but it is possible that Lord Guy does not have marriage to me in mind.”

“An *affaire de coeur*, you mean?” Sonia’s cheeks dimpled. “What would be the harm if so? You are both unattached and not innocent

babes."

Gemma regarded her in shock. *"Sonia."*

"Do not be surprised, dear Stepmama. I am hardly the foolish young thing most people believe I am. I saw how passionately you kissed Lord Guy. You could be very happy as his mistress. None would blame you."

"Except me." Gemma straightened her back, snapping out of her amazement. "Any more scandal from me would ruin your chances. I'll not have that. I want you to be happy, so happy you walk on clouds," she finished adamantly.

Sonia regarded her in puzzlement, and then her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Gemma. You are so very dear to me."

She threw her arms around Gemma, and Gemma gathered Sonia close, her heart full.

"I love you too, darling Sonia." Gemma wiped a tear from Sonia's cheek, her own eyes moist. The greatest gift John Broadbent had given Gemma was his daughter, and she would be forever grateful to him for that.

GEMMA BELIEVED her admonishment to Sonia would be the end of any speculation about Lord Guy.

She saw nothing of Guy for the next days, not at the theatre, or in Hyde Park, or at Vauxhall, or at any soiree or garden party she, Sonia, Aunt Margot, and Tristan attended. No matter how much she gazed about for him while pretending not to, Gemma never spied him. Guy did not even put in an appearance at a garden party hosted by Helena and Ash at their Berkeley Square home.

"Oh, he is galloping about the country somewhere," Helena answered when Sonia eagerly inquired as to Guy's whereabouts.

"Looking over the duke's Surrey house?" Sonia asked, pretending innocent curiosity.

"Perhaps." Helena remained vague, but Gemma noticed her friend's little smile before she turned away to wave ladies toward the rose bushes at the end of the garden.

Maddening.

Guy continued to be elusive, despite Gemma's constant vigilance, until, of all people, her stepson Tristan brought news of him.

Tristan visited often, his excuse that he wished to make certain that the ladies of his "female family," as he called Gemma, Sonia, and Aunt Margot, were safe and well. Gemma had long ago realized he simply liked their companionship.

Tristan at age thirty had not married, though he sometimes

wistfully expressed a wish to. Old for his age, Tristan enjoyed discussing horses rather than doing any riding himself, preferred drinking tea laced with brandy and wearing warm slippers to having a jolly tramp through the countryside. He needed an amiable wife who would be content to stay indoors and keep him company.

Aunt Margot and Sonia had departed to shop, in spite of rain that had begun to pour down, and Gemma received Tristan herself. She admitted she was pleased to see him, as the solitude she'd pretended she desired was wearing thin.

"How are you today, Gemma?" Tristan greeted her as he settled into a chair by the fire and accepted a cup of tea. The housekeeper, used to Tristan, had no doubt added a dollop of spirits. "Not too tired from our sojourn in Surrey, are you?"

"Not at all," Gemma said. "It was a welcome outing."

"London will become stifling hot before too long." Tristan's voice grew weary. "You are lucky in your friends. Such a beautiful home the duke has in Surrey. Lord Guy Lovell will buy the place, he tells me, fitting it out for himself."

Gemma's breath caught, and the teacup she'd raised trembled. "He will live there in truth?" Did this mean he would spend most of his time in Surrey? Dashing any hopes of Gemma seeing him in London before the Season's end?

"He says so. He has returned to his digs at Albany in Piccadilly for now until the purchase goes through." Tristan took a glum sip of tea. "Though I don't fancy his chances of living long enough to enjoy that grand home."

Gemma jerked her wandering thoughts back to Tristan. "You do not? Why?"

Tristan scowled over his teacup. "Because he's gone and done a foolish thing, hasn't he? Accepted a challenge by that coxcomb, Wakefield, to a duel. Wakefield is a terrible shot, so he has convinced a friend to stand in for him, one Ross Symmonds, who *is* a dead shot." Tristan sighed heavily. "I fear that our friend Guy might be for it."

Gemma stared at him, her teacup frozen halfway to her lips, her blood turned to ice. Tristan lost his frown and became solicitous.

"Oh, my dear, I should not have told you so abruptly. I know Mr. Cooke was lost to a duel. Never worry. I am certain Lord Guy will prevail. He is a crack shot, and his second is the Duke of Ashford. The duke may talk sense into both him and Wakefield before the event."

Gemma scarcely heard him, dazed thoughts spinning in her head. Tristan tried to converse on topics more innocuous, but he gave up before long, finished his tea, and departed.

Gemma saw Tristan to the door, her farewells wooden. Her legs were so stiff she was surprised she didn't shatter into pieces when

Tristan gave her shoulder a pat before he stalked out of the house.

"James," Gemma called in a firm tone to the footman after he'd closed the front door. "Please fetch my carriage."

Chapter 8

Gemma gathered her shawl close as rain beat on the top of the closed landau, puddling in the street, and raising a mist. She peered through the water-streaked carriage window at the grand edifice that was Albany, the highly fashionable residence of aristocratic bachelors in Piccadilly.

She could not descend and enter the house herself without either ruining her already fragile reputation or causing apoplexy to the residents. Instead, she'd sent the footman James, whom she'd recruited to accompany her, inside with a message.

Gemma wondered whether Guy would bother to answer, if he even was at home. She clasped her hands in gloves that could not warm her, though the air was only a tad cool.

Just as she was beginning to despair, James emerged from the house and dashed through the rain to the carriage. Gemma's heart sank when she spied no one behind him in the mists.

"He's coming, madam," James said breathlessly through the open window.

"Thank you." Gemma numbly handed him a coin with shaking fingers. "Take yourself indoors somewhere and find a hot drink."

James brightened. "Yes, madam. Thank you, madam." He was off along the street before she could blink.

When she glanced at the house once more, she beheld Guy striding through the courtyard and out its gate.

"Gemma?" he asked in concern as he stopped beneath her window. "What on earth are you doing here? You'll be drenched."

"It is perfectly dry inside the coach." Gemma turned the handle and opened the door for him. "I need to speak to you."

Guy climbed inside and closed the door, his greatcoat well spotted with droplets. He pulled the window shut against the rain that tried to follow him in. "You could have sent word. I'd have called upon you in your nice, cozy house."

"We could not be private there." If Lord Guy called, Aunt Margot or Sonia or both would certainly be present, not to mention the housekeeper, footmen, and maids.

A warm smile crossed his lips. “Ah, private. That is different.” He’d taken the seat opposite her, and now he leaned forward. “You give me hope, my dear Gemma.”

Gemma remained stiff. “I have heard you have contracted to fight a duel.”

Guy waved a gloved hand. “Oh, that. ’Tis only that boor, Wakefield. You should not be troubled. All will be finished in a trice.”

“Tristan told me Mr. Wakefield has found someone to stand in for him.”

“Not entirely within the rules, no, but Ash conceded to Mr. Symmonds to give poor Wakefield a chance. Symmonds isn’t a bad man—I knew him in the Army. But never fear, my dear. It will be over before you—”

“Guy, for heaven’s sake!”

Gemma balled her hands, her breath coming fast as anger poured through her, followed by fear, desperation, and anger again.

Guy stared at her. “Gemma …”

“A *duel*. How could you? How could Ashford? How could Helena not stop you? Did you forget that my husband Mr. Cooke *died* in a duel? In a foolish, dangerous, senseless act that left me a widow, and had tongues wagging all over England about me and poor Rupert.”

Gemma ran out of breath, pressing her fists to her abdomen. She would not weep. That would weaken her, and she wanted to shout and storm.

Guy studied her in disquiet. “I did not forget. I also recall that Cooke died defending the honor of another woman. I will never forgive him for that. But I am defending *your* honor, Gemma. And mine. Wakefield is a lout, and I will keep him from you forever.”

“By killing him? Or his stand-in? What is this Mr. Symmonds thinking, being willing to die for the likes of Hector Wakefield?”

“Die?” Guy had the gall to smile. “No one will die, my dear. We will fire our weapons and walk away.”

“*You* might do so, but Tristan believes you are in true danger.”

“Not at all. Ash has arranged it.” Guy’s flash of humor died. “You are dear to me, Gemma. I want to teach all gentlemen that they cannot disparage you or think of you in any terms other than respectful ones. Your honor will be spared.”

“Damn my honor!” The words rang through the carriage.

Guy’s lips parted. “My dear …”

“I am *not* your dear.” Gemma turned her fury on him. “Do you not understand why I am shouting? You contracted to fight a duel. One that could mean your death. What if Mr. Symmonds has taken money from Mr. Wakefield to not miss? What if he kills you? What would become of me?”

“I have no fear, but even if I am hit, Wakefield will shut his mouth and keep from you forever.”

“Mr. Wakefield is not the point.” Gemma trembled on the edge of the seat, her shawl falling from her shoulders, her face level with Guy’s. “The point is I would lose you. You would be taken from me in another mindless duel, and I would be alone again. Without *you*.”

She shouted the last words, the drumming rain increasing to emphasize her anguish.

Guy only stared at her, his brown eyes flickering with pain. He began to speak, then cleared his throat.

“Gemma. You would care … ?”

“Would I care?” She sent him an incredulous look. “Of course I would care. How can I not?”

“I know we have become friends.”

“Friends?” Gemma started to her feet, recalled she was in a carriage, and sat down with a thump. “*Friends.* You have become far more to me than that, Guy Lovell. It is a good name for you. Because that is what I feel for you. *Love*.”

Guy stilled like a man turned to stone, his face draining of color. “Love,” he whispered.

“Yes. I have said it. Love.” Giddiness welled up inside her. “I love, esteem, and care for you. Losing you would make me die inside. Do you care so little for me that you would make me attend your funeral?”

“Do I care so little?” Guy’s words began as a hoarse rasp then grew in strength. “Care so little? For you? Gemma, my darling, when you rushed into that sitting room and shouted *Thimbles*, I was enchanted, delighted, enamored. You ensnared me at that moment and have not let me go since. Care little for you? Why do you think I’m badgering Ash to purchase his beautiful house? So I can have someplace to take you that is worthy of you, that is why. Dear Lord, Gemma. I love you. I love every facet of you.”

Gemma had drawn a breath to continue arguing, but it wheezed back out like the croak of a startled frog.

“Then why do you want to die in a duel?”

Guy let out a groan. He slammed his hand to his head, dislodging his rain-spattered hat so he could clutch at his hair. The hat fell to the seat, drops splashing from it.

“I do *not* want to die in the duel, it so happens. Never. I’d do nothing that took me from you. Devil take it, how did we come to this pass?”

“I do not know.” Tears stung Gemma’s eyes. “I only know I could never bear it if I lost you.”

Guy left his seat and landed next to her. His sardonic humor had

vanished, nothing in his eyes but anguish, and behind that, loneliness and longing.

"Then to hell with the duel. Forgive my language, but strong words are called for. I will have Ash tell Wakefield to go kiss his own—er—hand."

"Refuse the duel?" Gemma's heart squeezed. "I've never heard of a gentleman walking away from such things."

"Pah. I will walk, skip, dance, and run away. I care nothing for what Wakefield thinks of me, or any of the *ton* fixated on such things. I only care for *you*."

"I certainly do not want you to fight it," Gemma said in worry. "But nor do I want Mr. Wakefield to make trouble for you."

"He will not." Guy's smile was grim. "He is afraid of me, but that is nothing to the terror Ash induces in him. Very helpful to have a friend who is a formidable duke with a mighty temper. You leave Wakefield to us."

"I suppose I shall have to," Gemma conceded. She knew exactly what she was asking, but her fear of losing Guy when she'd only just found him swallowed every other concern.

"Gemma, you give me hope." Guy gathered her to him. His coat, damp, held his heat; his arms, strength. "My darling, darling girl, for the first time in my life, you have made me hope. Could it be, that if I were to go down on one knee and beg you to marry me, you'd give me the answer I wished?"

Gemma's heart hammered, and she had no idea what sort of words might come from her mouth. "I believe so," she said shakily.

"She believes so. She toys with me. Very well." Guy slid from the seat and awkwardly perched on one knee in the small space. "Gemma, my dearest and then more dear Gemma, my angel, my life. Will you do me the honor of making me the happiest man on earth?"

Gemma gasped as a wave of pure joy engulfed her. The bewilderment of Hugh's death, the bleak years after John's passing, and the shock and shame of Rupert's ignominious end, faded before it. The whispers and titters that had followed her for years, speculating on her three rapid widowhoods, died away into the rainy afternoon.

This was Guy, her friend who made her laugh, who understood her worries, and knew how she longed for the world to leave her in peace. This was Guy of the warm smiles and bold kisses, who played music like a dream and whose voice drowned her in heat.

"Yes," Gemma said softly. Then loudly, with a smile she couldn't suppress. "Yes!"

"Heaven help me." Guy slid onto the seat beside her again, his eyes wet. "I am in love. And want to marry." He gulped air then he captured her face in his hands, his fingers warm through his close-

fitting gloves. “Gemma you are saving me from unimaginable bleakness.”

“You saved me,” Gemma contradicted. She smoothed his hair that he’d rumpled. “When I needed you.”

Guy held her gaze, his dark eyes filled with tenderness. “No, lady. You burst in upon me, and happy day that you did.” He caressed her cheek with a strong thumb. “Enough of this witty banter, my dear. I want to celebrate your answer in the best way I can imagine.”

Gemma knew how she wanted to celebrate as well. Before Guy could lean to her, she seized him and pulled him fervently down into her arms.

Guy laughed, and then he was kissing her, she lying on the cushions with Guy’s weight on her, his mouth opening hers, his warmth a fine blanket. He slid one hand to her breast, gently cupping, streaming fire through her.

“I love you, Guy,” she whispered.

“I love you, Gemma, my lady.” Guy touched a kiss to her lower lip. “*Chrysanthemums*, how I love you.”

Gemma burst out laughing. Guy reached up and thumped the roof to tell the coachman to drive them home, then he resumed kissing Gemma. They were alone in this bubble of happiness, the world shut out, the pattering rain keeping time with the joyful beating of their hearts.

Epilogue

Three months later

Guy reflected that he finally understood the true meaning of the phrase "happiest man in the world."

It meant standing at the altar in a church on a fine summer day, gazing at one's beloved, roses in her extraordinary hair, and watching her smile in return. It meant grinning widely as a reedy-voiced vicar spoke the marriage service, he and his beloved exchanging secretive, amused glances as the vicar droned on.

Gemma wore a peach-colored gown that shimmered as she moved and flushed her face with color. The roses, pink and red, adorned her thick dark tresses and the bouquet she'd carried up the aisle.

She repeated her vows in a clear, liquid voice, finishing with *And thereto I give thee my troth.*

Aunt Margot, in the first row, touched a handkerchief to her eyes. Sonia, next to Gemma as her attendant, smiled in glee, her own eyes moist, and even Tristan, who'd escorted Gemma up the aisle, coughed and muttered something about dust.

The Duke of Ashford, standing with Guy, appeared both pleased with Guy's choice and amazed he went through with it. Guy, the avowed bachelor, had fallen.

Hadn't fallen as much as leapt, Guy told himself. And why not? Guy had realized this morning as Ash and his valet had dressed him, that his dedication to bachelorhood had come about only because he'd not met the woman of his dreams before this. He'd not been so much devoted to the bachelor cause as simply waiting for it to end.

The church was full to bursting. Aunt Margot, who had expressed relief that Guy had finally proposed when they'd announced it that rainy afternoon, had invited the entire *ton*, it seemed. Lord and Lady Whitwell had come, Lady Whitwell pleased with herself that her famous ball had thrown Guy and Gemma together. Wakefield had arrived as well, surprisingly. Ash had made certain Wakefield took the

cancelled duel civilly, Ash proclaiming that all honor remained intact. None had dared to argue with him.

Even Uncle Clem had deviated from his daily routine and now nodded at Guy from the front pew. He sat next to Guy's brother and his wife, the marquess and marchioness, prim sticks who'd both softened considerably when they'd met Gemma and seen how much Guy adored her. Guy's three nephews were beside them, a sharp-eyed nanny at the end of the pew, the boys behaving themselves for the moment. That could change abruptly.

Then there was Helena, plump with child, more beautiful than Guy had ever beheld her, and more smug as well. Her part in bringing Guy and Gemma together—pretending with Aunt Margot that she was helping put Guy in front of Sonia—had been underhanded but effective. Guy mentally saluted her.

After what seemed an interminable time, the vicar finally said the words Guy had been longing to hear:

I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Guy took Gemma, beautiful Gemma, into his arms, and kissed her. She tasted of warmth and smelled of roses, and Guy finally knew the happiness that had eluded him all the days of his life.

June, 1816

ROSES WERE BLOOMING ONCE MORE at the stone house in Surrey when Helena and Ash arrived, their four children in tow.

Gemma met them in the garden, Guy's rumbling voice behind her filling her with strength.

Helena, who'd hurried to find Gemma, ran the last few steps and then halted in excitement, clasping her hands as she gazed at the bundle in Gemma's arms.

"Oh, my, he is a delight. Ash do you not think he is a delight?" Helena called to her husband who followed her, his daughters Evie and Lily clutching his hands. "How is little Clement, then?" She gushed at the babe, who was a few months old, reaching a tentative finger to poke his tummy. Baby Clement gurgled and cooed. "He looks exactly like you, Guy," Helena concluded.

Guy came to a halt beside Gemma, sliding an arm around her and kissing her cheek. "Small, red, and wrinkled?"

"Do not be so silly." Helena cooed back at little Clem, named for his very proud great-great uncle. "His eyes, I mean. The same

chocolate brown. But his hair is all Gemma's. Is he not spectacular, Ash?" She turned her bright smile on Gemma. "Well done, my dear."

Gemma, filled with laughter, could not answer.

"I had *something* to do with it," Guy protested.

Helena sent him a disparaging glance. "A very little something. Women do all the work at this, Guy dear. I ought to know."

Now Helena beamed with pride. Behind Ash came his oldest son, Lewis, and a nanny who carried Alden, a plump boy of one and a half years.

They'd grown so, Gemma thought fondly. Ash's older three children's confidence had surged since Helena had become their mother, they flourishing under the quiet assurance that they were loved.

"He's very little," Lily, who was now nine, declared. "Won't be riding for a few years, I'd say. But my brother was very little too, and now he is growing robust."

"Riding soon, though," Lewis said with twelve-year-old conviction. "He's Uncle Guy's heir and will be riding and shooting and hunting in no time."

"He'll have some book learning too," Evie, ten, said. Evie was adamant about books, reading every one she could find. "He will need that."

"In time," Lewis scoffed. "Let him have a bit of fun, first."

"I do agree Lewis," Guy said affably. "Every gentleman must enjoy his life. But ladies like book learning, and every gentleman wants to please the ladies."

Lewis frowned, dubious, but Gemma suspected that in a few years he'd understand. Lewis was already manifesting the handsomeness of his father, and not long from now, young ladies would be trying to catch his eye.

"You mentioned riding," Guy said to Lewis. "More than once, in fact. I believe there are horses waiting in the stable yard who need some exercise. Shall we?"

Guy kissed Gemma once more, this time a lingering kiss on the lips that reminded Gemma of the passion they'd shared the night before, alone in their bed, a soft breeze brushing their bodies as they touched and kissed in sweet afterglow.

Guy finally broke away to lead an eager Lewis toward the stables. Ash, who greeted Gemma with a gentle kiss on her cheek, followed, the two girls scampering on either side of him. Helena happily gathered up Alden from the nanny, who sped to the house to check on the nursery arrangements.

"How are you, Gemma?" Helena asked with a wise look once they'd gone.

Gemma softly jounced Clem, who gurgled his pleasure. “Very well, Helena. Exceedingly so.”

“Well, you have done it. Congratulations, my dear.”

Gemma, who’d believed herself barren, let joy fill her. She watched Guy stride to the stables, giving in to antics for a few paces to entertain Lewis.

“Guy is so very happy,” she said to Helena. “I am pleased I could do this for him—give him a son, I mean.”

“You’ve given him more than that, Gemma darling.” Helena kissed Alden’s silken hair as he gazed longingly after his siblings. “Ash has known Guy a long time, and I have come to know him well. He was incomplete, always searching for a part of himself, though I think he did not realize it. You gave him that completion. Your love. You.”

“You will make my head quite large,” Gemma said with a smile.

“Nonsense. You are a lovely woman, and he is lucky to have you.”

“And I him.” Gemma’s heart swelled, and she kissed Clem’s forehead, the love in her threatening to overwhelm her. “Can any woman be as lucky as I am?”

“I feel rather fortunate myself.” Helena’s grin held sparkle. “But we will let our husbands dote upon us. They enjoy it.”

Gemma burst out laughing. Alden, sunny natured, joined in, and Clem burbled his enthusiasm.

Helena laced her arm through Gemma’s and the two ladies turned for the house, which glowed gold in the sunlight. Three figures emerged from it—Tristan heading to join the gentlemen, Sonia racing across the lawn toward Helena, and Aunt Margot following her at a more decorous pace.

Sonia … She still searched for her own happily ever after, and Gemma was determined she’d find it.

Guy’s laughter surged from the direction of the stables. Clem cooed, recognizing his father’s voice. Then Sonia and Aunt Margot reached them, wrapping Helena and Alden in hugs.

Gemma gazed across the green to Guy, who saw her and waved. Then her handsome, laughing, gallant gentleman sent a kiss winging to her on the wind.

Gemma caught it in her hand, inducing his warm smile, and all was right with her world.

THANK YOU FOR READING! If you are interested in Ash and Helena’s story, it is told in *Duke in Search of a Duchess*.

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New York Times bestselling and award-winning author Jennifer Ashley has more than 100 published novels and novellas in romance, urban fantasy, mystery, and historical fiction under the names Jennifer Ashley, Allyson James, and Ashley Gardner. Jennifer's books have been translated into more than a dozen languages and have earned starred reviews in *Publisher's Weekly* and *Booklist.* When she isn't writing, Jennifer enjoys playing music (guitar, piano, flute), reading, hiking, and building dollhouse miniatures.

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A Kiss for Luck

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